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Beauty for Harmony: Moral Negotiations and Autonomous Acts in Diyarbakır, Turkey

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Abstract

Beauty can be a source of self-making within a political community and that self can display moral autonomy via publicly visible and invisible practices while still adhering to a community. At a time of transition during the late 2000s from militarized resistance to urban civil politics, radical democracy, and gender ideals, older militarized notions of the Kurdish self, body, and beauty were changing. In a context of heightened visibility within the movement, women active in the Kurdish movement responded by recrafting their femininities, using beautification practices as a modern, urban, and empowering political tool. But beautification of the new self also entailed often sticky negotiations over the moral boundaries between the self and the movement, producing anxieties over what and who should constitute the moral. As women's actions, public roles, and visibilities became important indicators of the Kurdish movement's political success, their beauty practices and beautiful visibilities came to be viewed through the urgent need for moral unity. Central to Kurdish women activists' experience of and response to the political and social transformations going on around them, the integration of beauty practices into their politics placed moral autonomy at the center of the construction of new models of Kurdish femininity.

Key Words

Beauty, subjectivity, moral autonomy, Kurdish femininity, Turkey

Introduction

In March 2014, lifting a worn-out, pale white curtain aside, I stepped inside Hümeyra's beauty salon.¹ One side of the room was filled with standard coiffure decorations—the poster of a white blonde woman, cosmetic products, two mirrors, styling chairs. The other looked like a living room, with two brown couches and two dingy Victorian-style armchairs positioned together in a circle with a small coffee table in the middle. The walls were hung with art Hümeyra had made herself: a pencil drawing of Ayşe Şan, a famous *dengbej* singer² later ostracized because of an illicit affair, exiting the walled historical city center of Diyarbakır from one of its large gates and leaving the city behind³ and a sketch of a heterosexual couple making love, the man on top with only the woman's face visible, wearing an expression of pleasure. Both sketches gestured at immorality and the taboos around female sexuality. Yet despite its intimate female atmosphere, the place was marked by Kurdish politics: a Kurdish business name, a

¹ The material for this article was gathered over the course of twelve months of fieldwork carried out between 2011 and 2015 during a period of relative calm in Diyarbakır, Turkey. Extended participant observation at four beauty salons and multiple in-depth interviews with fifteen Kurdish activist women form the basis for my observations here. For ethical reasons, identifying details have been changed where necessary.

² A *dengbej* is a composer and/or singer of epics or “traditional” songs. See Schäfers, “Being Sick of Politics.”

³ Later, Hümeyra would tell me Şan's story. Accused of carrying on an affair with her teacher, she was forced to leave Diyarbakır. She died in İzmir, in exile. Despite her wishes, her body has still not been returned to her hometown.

location in one of the most politicized neighborhoods of the city, an owner who had become an aesthetician as a runaway from the police. From that first day on, I would be privy to conversations where Hümeyra and her customers would say quite unpleasant things about Kurdish politicians and their policies. It was in this space, I learned, that activist Kurdish women engaged in beautification practices and cared for themselves and one another at the same time that they crafted their political positioning in the new Kurdish political order. In such a highly politicized context as Diyarbakır, beauty could never remain apolitical. But what this space and those who frequented it made clear was that beauty had become a way of conducting politics.

Hümeyra's salon was located in the crowded and chaotic district of Bağlar, unique in that most of its 400,000 residents had been forced over the past three decades to migrate to the city due to the armed conflict between the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (Kurdistan Workers' Party, hereafter PKK) and the Turkish state. The young residents of Bağlar have grown into the experience of displacement and political violence, and are known to be rebellious, frequently blockading the neighborhood with burning tires and engaging in confrontations with the police. This location in Bağlar distinguished Hümeyra's salon from the others I visited in the city center. The majority of her customers were women who either lived nearby and had thus been politicized as migrants or who knew Hümeyra through their political networks. If it had not been for her sister who worked at a pro-Kurdish organization I frequented during my fieldwork, I would most likely not have discovered the salon. Without such intimate connection, my best anthropological efforts would not have led me there.

This female sanctuary within the chaotic life of the city turned out to be a crucial field site where I would meet many Kurdish activist women from Bağlar and beyond. A veteran activist of forty-two, Hümeyra also had a political background herself—most of her customers were also her

close friends—but she did not like to talk about it. NGO workers, lawyers, politicians, and grassroots activists frequented her salon and chatted back and forth about matters both personal and political. Casual in her black coverall, cardigan, and slippers, Hümeýra would invariably make Turkish coffee for her visitors and herself and then read their cups.

In the new era of Kurdish democracy and Turkish “peace process” stretching between 2009 and 2015, the beauty salon exemplifies a newly emergent space in Kurdish politics where women care for their bodies, their friendships, and their political selves. In these practices of care, “becoming beautiful” (*güzelleşmek*) gains new meanings and, as I argue here, opens up space for moral negotiations over such vital political questions as who belongs in the political community, how to transition from armed to civil struggle, and in what manner life can be normalized after years of political violence. At a time when the political community was in a state of high anxiety over its moral force, its principles, and its boundaries, beautification practices constituted a space where such moral work could be embodied and negotiated. I contend both that engagement with their bodies is central to Kurdish women’s experience of and response to the ongoing political and social transformations and that it places moral autonomy at the center of the construction of new Kurdish femininities.

Discussing beauty with Kurdish activist women in Diyarbakır, a Kurdish-majority city in southeast Turkey, was not always easy. The city had been under emergency law for a decade and a half (1987-2002) due to the war between the PKK and the state. Yet, gradually with the democratic turn in Kurdish politics, the 1999 declaration of a unilateral ceasefire by the PKK, and the winning of the municipal elections in the same year by the pro-Kurdish People’s Democracy Party, Diyarbakır functioned as the center of the new Kurdish civil politics. Because of this, a number of pro-Kurdish NGOs were able to operate across various realms of social and cultural

life. In this climate of hypervisibility within the new urban civil politics of the Kurdish movement, some women refused to open up space for beauty in their conversations with me, arguing that it was trivial. For other women, the topic of beauty allowed for an intimate space, where their conversations tacked back and forth between individual tastes in fashion and traditional dress, painful memories of a relationship, and philosophical ruminations on the relation between aesthetics and moral selfhood. This connectivity of beauty discourses to personal, social, and political matters indexes the overarching goals of this article: what is the meaning of beauty in Kurdish politics, what moral space does it stake out, and how do beauty practices become the means through which women cultivate their political positions?

Searching for the Good: Beauty Practices and New Ideals

Revolutionary and resistance movements take their strength from both their ideological program and from the alternative good they propose in it. By necessity, a movement that aims to build an alternative political reality constructs moral regimes that entail new notions of the self, community, and the world constructed on that good. This attempt reaches deep into the sensual realm: to hear the revolution, songs are composed; as a way of touching it, people dance; to see it, a new aesthetic is created. In this way, the good of the resistance or revolution is woven together as an embodied set of life practices, with “beauty” constructed as the visible reflection of the new good.

Because as modern projects nationalist, anticolonial, and resistance movements “think” beauty and aesthetics through the female body, feminist scholarship has long scrutinized their

gendered representations of beauty.⁴ In her landmark examination of nationalist portrayals of women as the symbolic and biological bearers of the nation Nira Yuval-Davis notes that they are simultaneously constructed within a gender-based division of labor whereby women (and their children) are in need of protection by men.⁵ Within anti- and postcolonial nationalist movements, beauty has often been associated by male nationalists with native womanhood, in some instances a beauty that is both exoticized and sexualized.⁶ With the global circulation and domination of Western standards in the contemporary period, beauty has become both a means to embrace modernity and international competition and an internal source of moral anxiety. In her work on nationalist discourses deployed within beauty pageants in India, Huma Ahmed-Ghosh demonstrates how such spectacular events are appropriated both in service of the nation's international agendas and so as to construct an image of female "respectability" via the imposition of tight state control over representations of beauty so as to eliminate any subversive deviation away from the conservative ideas of "true" womanhood.⁷ This anxiety over civil control can turn violent, as Cynthia Enloe demonstrates in her research on the fatal militia attacks on women's beauty salons in post-occupation Baghdad.⁸ Jennifer Fluri's research on Afghan

⁴ For the gendering of beauty in the context of relations with Europe in late nineteenth-century Iran, see Najmabadi, "Gendered Transformations."

⁵ Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 15.

⁶ For an example within anti- and postcolonial male nationalist narratives, see Saraswati, "Why Beauty Matters."

⁷ Ahmed-Ghosh, "Writing the Nation."

⁸ Enloe, *Nimo's War*.

participation in beauty schools and pageants demonstrates how the beauty can be used in the service of Western military intervention abroad; cloaked under humanitarian and feminist support, beauty can become the means to justify military and political intervention.⁹

Although women's bodies have often been taken to be passive sites where discursive warfare is waged, recent feminist researchers have offered ways of understanding women's agencies amid such hegemonic maneuvering. In anticolonial and antioccupation contexts, for example, women often beautify themselves while also upholding conservative symbols due to "the difficulty for young women to override the emotional glue of nationalist ideas and symbols that the presence of foreign forces has revived."¹⁰ In the Soviet regime, women followed Soviet norms of femininity, modesty, and hygiene, but also resisted and changed them by gradually adapting Western beauty practices and obtaining beauty products.¹¹ My intervention follows this agency turn in beauty studies. By focusing on the beauty practices of politically engaged women in the Kurdish movement, I analyze their agency through the concept of "moral autonomy."

I use the term *moral autonomy* to refer to instances where subjects diverge from, think about, or experiment with a distance from the prescribed norms of a movement, ideology or community they adhere to without necessarily quitting them. This internal, critical movement of the subject away from a strict adherence to moral norms is central to my concept of moral autonomy. Within the field of moral anthropology, a key discussion revolves around morality's power over the social reproduction of the moral order (subordination) and acts of ethical freedom

⁹ Fluri, "The Beautiful 'Other.'"

¹⁰ Billaud, *Kabul Carnival*, 146.

¹¹ Kay, *Gender, Equality and Difference*, 29.

(autonomy).¹² Must individuals always adhere to moral norms, injunctions, and values, or are they able to forge their own notions of the moral and good? How far does such freedom reach? For those scholars who reject this binary, moral plurality becomes an important object of inquiry alongside research into the agentic possibilities that exist even within the social reproduction of hegemonic moral orders.¹³ Do those involved in reproducing moral orders also have some measure of autonomy with which to negotiate them?

Adherents to moral orders often display moral autonomy by adopting attitudes of suspicion, cynicism, and skepticism to the moral order that do not necessarily translate into political autonomy. In her work with Israeli soldiers, Erica Weiss portrays evasion and cynicism among the disillusioned soldiers as an invisible but prevalent form of moral negotiation.¹⁴ Rather than taking the more political position of conscientious objector, these soldiers manage to take some measure of moral distance from militarist values of the Israeli Defense Forces while continuing to remain in the institution. The exercise of autonomous moral judgment may also result from subjective positioning at the center of a moral order, knowledge of which can be accessed via everyday practices. Lotte Buch Segal has demonstrated how the wives of Palestinian political prisoners in Israel are constantly expected to be exemplary, requiring them to perform themselves as steadfast, sacrificial, and persevering.¹⁵ Yet, their individual hardships constantly endow them with a skeptical perspective on the future and the value of the national struggle. Such

¹² Robbins, "Between Reproduction and Freedom."

¹³ Cassaniti and Hickman, "New Directions."

¹⁴ Weiss, "Beyond Mystification."

¹⁵ Segal, "The Burden of Being Exemplary," 36.

ethnographic examples point to openings at the heart of hegemonic moral orders for the possibility of differently articulated critical stances, even when determined conviction in the good of the moral order being critiqued is retained.

Both resistance and revolutionary movements produce anxiety over the subversive unpredictability of moral autonomy. Once the revolution is over, the transition to sovereignty tends to require a different set of engagements, bringing complexity to the moral and emotional fields. Rebellion must turn into adherence, frustration into hopefulness, righteousness into flexibility and negotiation. This realignment of behavior and emotion within postresistance and postrevolutionary social spheres often creates a sense of disillusionment with the revolution.¹⁶

Similar moral confusion has occurred within the Kurdish movement in the post-conflict era. In the years following the intense military conflict of the 1990s, the movement has officially abandoned separatist politics and turned instead to the building of a democratic confederacy based on the central tenets of multiculturalism, gender equity, and ecology.¹⁷ Although the ideological goal was to establish a radically democratic self-ruling society, the new focus on local governance enabled experimentation with limited sovereignty. Conditions in the localities were ripe for such an experiment. With the 1999 capture and imprisonment of the Kurdish movements' leader, Abdullah Öcalan, and the entry of Turkey into EU accession status, the war had calmed down. Though fragile and unpredictable, peace negotiations were taking place in which the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy party played a key role. Grassroots activists from within the

¹⁶ See Greenberg, *After the Revolution*, Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense*, and Scott, *Omens of Adversity*.

¹⁷ Casier and Jongerden, "Understanding Today's Kurdish Movement."

movement had been elected to the Turkish parliament and the local governors had built ties with the international community.

Despite such local and national emboldening, moral confusion and a general sense of frustration and disillusionment were prevalent in Diyarbakır during the time of my fieldwork. For many, the Kurdish movement had won a victory: it had seats in parliament and in local government, ties to the international community, and a network of civic organizations gaining footholds in every aspect of life. Yet, a strong sense of communal harmony, unity, and solidarity was lacking. The hegemony of the ruling Turkish *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, hereafter AKP) and its Islamist ideology¹⁸ was a real threat that intensified the anxieties of civil assimilation in the urban centers. The internal conflicts that emanated from accusations of nepotism and of replacement of revolutionary values with neoliberal logic fuelled the fears of political fragmentation. The only response to this, it seemed, was to be unified in politics and morals.¹⁹

In this socially and politically fraught context, Kurdish women's beauty practices were charged with an extra layer of meaning. In the 2000s, gender equity became particularly important in the movement's efforts to distinguish itself from the ruling Islamist AKP party and what the movement considered to be a gender-backward Middle East. Kurdish women were thus positioned as the catalyzers of a bottom-up, thorough transformation toward a democratic and autonomous society. As women's actions, public roles, and visibilities became important

¹⁸ Yörük, "Neoliberal Hegemony."

¹⁹ See Shäfers' article this volume for the history of the competition between the Kurdish movements and the Turkish state over Kurdish citizens.

indicators of the Kurdish movement's political success, their beauty practices and beautiful visibilities came to be viewed through the urgent need for moral unity. Even those women activists I spoke with who were not at the forefront of the movement engaged with their body with this knowledge in mind.

Increased Visibility and the Pressure to Become Beautiful: “Natural Femininity” and Moral Correctness

Beauty's role in the lives of Kurdish women has changed in line with the broader transformations occurring within the movement. As a Marxist-Leninist organization waging an armed conflict, one of the distinguishing aspects of the PKK is its disciplined emphasis on the ideological trainings of its militants. These trainings consist of Öcalan's widely circulated published speeches and collective analysis sessions.²⁰ The new guerrilla selfhood is predicated upon certain ideas of body and beauty, which transmit to the wider militant and activist communities.²¹ In the earlier stages of the conflict, Öcalan had described the official approach to beauty in the following terms: “Those who fight become free; those who are free become beautiful; those who become beautiful are loved.” In this formulation, beauty was to be the product of moral and physical cultivation as a fighter. The physical equivalence of this principle among female guerrillas was a masculinized appearance—short hair, facial hair, rough manners.²² Other definitions of beauty, particularly those from within normative, mainstream

²⁰ Grojean, “Production of the New Man.”

²² For the various stages of Kurdish feminine militancy, see Duzel, “Fragile Goddesses.”

fashion, were cast as morally opposite. One of my activist interlocutors reflected that during the peak years of the conflict in the 1990s her world was divided in two: the reality depicted on television showing the “West” amusing itself with beauty pageants and her own reality of the violence of war in the “East.” Beautification indexed ignorance, selfishness, and luxury.

In 2014, we were chatting with Nuriye, a woman just shy of forty, in her tiny store in the central district in Diyarbakır. She was at a stage in her life when, having been an activist for many long years, she had backed away from politics and was trying to build a more or less normal life. One difficulty for her was “how to become a woman.”

One day my older brother got angry with me. “You’re a young woman. Why do you have this mustache?” Then one day as I was walking, he patted my back. “Are you hiding something? Straighten up when you walk!” My brothers would say, “You walk like a clown (*soytarı*).” [...] One of my sisters bought me a pair of high heels. Another bought me a miniskirt. I told them, “Isn’t it a bit too late [for all this]?” “No,” they said. “You’ll get used to it.” But it’s very difficult for me. I mostly just wear these tiny earrings.

The pressure to become more feminine was not unique to Nuriye. I heard similar stories from other activist women of the same generation. Walking in such a way so as not to reveal the breasts, not removing facial hair, not wearing accessories or high heels were indexed as *masculine femininity*. Female guerrillas had embraced this kind of femininity as a way to legitimize themselves as fighters and the style soon spread to non-guerrilla militant and activist women, including Nuriye, in the cities.

What explains the new pressures to become more feminine in a sense where wearing high heels and miniskirts are now encouraged? I contend that this transformation in the moral conception of what it means to be a good female Kurdish activist has to do with an increasing public visibility of women brought about by two concurrent processes: the dynamics of the Kurdish movement's recent urbanization and gender mainstreaming within the Kurdish movement.

As the Kurdish movement began to move into urban spaces after 1999, female Kurdish activists were faced with the task of navigating increasing choices for self-care in the form of sports facilities, beauty centers, and shopping malls through which global norms of beauty penetrated.²³ As in Turkish and other developing nations, urbanization in Kurdish cities is closely connected to modernization, thereby associating beauty with the effort to become more modern. Within Kurdish politics, especially in its earlier Marxist-Leninist forms, modernization has entailed overcoming the "chains of tradition" which were accepted as feudal, colonial, and patriarchal.²⁴ The revolutionary Kurdish woman was therefore expected to modernize herself. In the current era, this concept has facilitated the embrace of global urban cultures.²⁵

²³ Jones, *Beauty Imagined*.

²⁴ Öcalan, *Kürdistan'da Kadın*.

²⁵ A similar superiority of the modern and distinction from tradition is built into the beauty practices of the beauty salons of Istanbul's upper-class neighborhoods where "nails polished in bright colors" are assumed to be a statement of one's secularism. See Liebelt, "Grooming Istanbul," 196.

Women's increased visibility due to the gender equity paradigm in the Kurdish movement is a newer and more complicated phenomenon. Here, moral power within Kurdish politics coalesces around female beauty through a form of femininity my interlocutors often referred to as "natural femininity" (*doğal kadınlık*) when they were describing the content of as well as the limits to their own notions of beauty. While my activist interlocutors welcomed global beauty because of its links to the ideological push for modernization, they also considered it a minefield. The idea that beautification practices imply moral shallowness and political alienation has not simply receded. They often repeated, "the capitalist system objectifies women and their bodies," a trap women lacking in political consciousness can easily fall into. Within the context of the ongoing military conflict and long years of Turkish martial law in the region, beautification also indexed Turkishness and thereby distanced practitioners of beautification from the national struggle, implying ethnic dilution. The new concept of natural femininity serves to sooth the inevitable anxieties produced by such lived "minefields" through the provision of political and moral correctness.

In an era of increased visibility, Kurdish activist women's beauty practices construct a new "natural" femininity that is at once modern, urban, empowering, political, and moral. This new and highly visible model of femininity gave rise to a beauty salon boom in Diyarbakır; every neighborhood sports at least a handful, some with names like "Heval Coiffeur," *heval* meaning comrade in Kurdish. Due to the expanding popularity and dominance of Kurdish politics in the city, these beauty practices were normatively impacted by its broader ideology, in particular the tenet of gender equity. But to achieve harmony between the political and moral realms in the new urban context these ideologies had to be redefined, a particularly urgent task due to the ground-level transformations the movement had to manage.

Gülnaz’s salon, also a professional beauty and aesthetician training school, is one of a number of establishments where the beauty norms of the new natural femininity were formulated. Financially and logistically supported by the pro-Kurdish Diyarbakır municipality, it was not only an ideal place to meet activist women seeking beauty services, but it also afforded me unique insight into how beauty norms were being newly negotiated and devised within the movement. Entirely different from the comfy and intimate aura of Hümeyra’s salon, Gülnaz’s salon-cum-training-center was professional in tone, sporting two brand new styling chairs, complex technical beauty equipment, cosmetic products, new laminate floors, and immaculate pale purple walls (figure 1).²⁶



Figure 1: Inside Gülnaz’s beauty salon, February 2015. Photo by Handan Coşkun.

²⁶ Purple, the symbolic color of feminism throughout Turkey, was used generously in municipality-led events of this period so as to designate the women-centered policy of the Kurdish movement. See Clark, “Green, Red, Yellow and Purple.”

Everything about Gülnaz's salon, from its interior decorations to its daily practices, displayed a concern to infuse beauty with consciousness. Clipboards on the walls exhibited news articles on such psychological and moral topics such as "The Psychological Effects of Your Clothes' Colors" or "Do Your Makeup in Harmony with Your Character." Gülnaz was responsible for updating the clipboards with relevant articles from mainstream Turkish newspapers, less often from the more political pro-Kurdish newspaper, *Özgür Gündem*. The didacticism was not coincidental. The same space was also used as an educational center where groups of women from lower-class neighborhoods received aesthetician training. Unlike other occupational trainings, at Gülnaz's salon women received gender consciousness trainings as a necessary component of their education. The subjects included gender equality, violence against women, sexuality, and *jineoloji*, the "science of woman, society, and life," the gender discourse articulated by the Kurdish movement's leader, Öcalan.²⁷

Gülnaz herself was quick to point out that psychological discourses in the courses and on display at the salon established continuity with Öcalan's prized maxim, "Those who fight becomes free; those who are free become beautiful; those who become beautiful are loved." Indeed, this maxim replicates a very common cataloging of beauty in terms of an inside (character, psychology, and consciousness) and an outside (the body, makeup, clothing). Such cataloging is pervasive in the era of *Cosmopolitan* globalization and self-help literatures producing mixed consequences in terms of female empowerment. In her analysis of the UK *Cosmopolitan*, Laura Favaro finds that the magazine constantly portrays feminine interiority as a site of toxicity and warfare and offers extreme individualization and hyper-autonomy as a

²⁷ "Editorial."

solution. Such solutions that come at the expense of collectivist approaches make women more vulnerable to neoliberal biopolitics.²⁸ Yet, even the Cosmo discourse is not uncontested; the Czech Republic version of the magazine however folds postsocialist background with feminist ideas creating venues for an agentive linking of the inner and outer beauty.²⁹ In the era of Kurdish urbanization and increased visibility for Kurdish women, the harmonization between the inner and outer selves, one's political consciousness and feminine beauty practices, had become all the more important with no less mixed implications.

The abstract and slippery concept of “nature” opens up another site of moral labor. The walls of Gülnaz's salon were hung not with a standard coiffure poster of a white blonde woman, but a modern rendition done in the style of an ancient Egyptian wall painting depicting a central female figure sipping a beverage while being groomed by other women (figure 2). The invocation of ancient beauty practices is in line with the movement's gender discourse of *jineoloji* that posits a golden age of humanity in the Neolithic period when matriarchal societies existed. The argument was that women had emotional intelligence, which stemmed from their proximity to nature as evinced by their reproductive bodies.³⁰ In an article published in the online Kurdish women's journal *Jineoloji Magazine* entitled “The Methodology of Quantum Physics in the Search for Truth,” the author Zöhre Bozacı advances the idea that sorcery, herbal medicine, and

²⁸ Favaro, “‘Just Be Confident Girls!’: Confidence Chic as Neoliberal Governmentality.”

²⁹ True, *Gender, Globalization, and Postsocialism*.

³⁰ This discourse continues with the idea that modernity imposed masculine scientific reasoning and analytical intelligence as norms, thereby thoroughly colonizing women and societies; the current state of society consisted of little more than the wholesale massacre and rape of women.

astrology were the originary seeds of the natural sciences performed by “the mother woman” (*ana kadın*) in the Neolithic period.³¹ Through such statements, gender discourse in the Kurdish movement develops an essentialist notion of femininity centered on a biological understanding of nature. Given the long-term turn away from motherhood due to intense militancy, this emphasis on motherhood cannot be taken literally. As exemplified in the Kurdish nationalist heroic story of Zilan, a Kurdish woman who carried out a suicide attack in 1996 with a bomb she had wrapped up around her body in such a way as to pretend to be pregnant, motherhood has also been redefined in militant terms as “birthing the nation.” In this way, abstract notions of a female nature and motherhood reconnect women with the moral ideal of sacrificial militancy.



Figure 2: Wall decorations at Gülnaz’s beauty salon, February 2015. Photo by Handan Coşkun.

The slippery semiotic nature of the new natural femininity results in more descriptions of what it is not, than of what it is. Gülnaz repeatedly maintained that natural beauty should be understood to mean “bringing an innate beauty to light.” She afforded most of our interview time

³¹ Bozaci, “Hakikat Arayışında.”

to talking about women's empowerment through gender trainings and to elaborating on “the wrong” examples. For example, “overdoing” beauty practices would disrupt a woman's modesty and simplicity. She rejected “pointy-toed shoes,” “camisole shirts,” “red lipstick,” and “dyeing the hair blonde” as they “sexualized” women “too much.” She proposed instead practices she defined as pre-republican Kurdish beauty techniques such as natural kohl eyeliner (*sürme*) and tattooing (*deq*), but I did not find them to be popular alternatives in my research.

Negotiations over hair color illustrate how natural femininity is managed. In place of the blond dye popular across Turkey and associated with “westernness”, Kurdish activists preferred the caramel tone in their hair-coloring practice. This was dubbed the “Hürrem Sultan phenomenon,” a reference to the eponymous protagonist in the world-renowned television miniseries about the reign of the Ottoman emperor Süleyman the Magnificent and his wife Hürrem Sultan.³² Despite its glorification of an imperialist Ottoman past that the AKP strategically coopted into its version of Turkish nationalism, the show enchanted Turkish and Kurdish audiences alike, including my politically engaged interlocutors. Hürrem-styled hair coloring, clothing, and accessories dominated the fashion of the time. According to Hümeýra, this caramel tone was popular in Kurdistan for two reasons. The most attractive feature of the caramel tone was the fact it was not hypervisible in the way that blonde hair was and could not therefore be associated with what blonde hair signified—normative femininity—yet it was still able to accomplish the goal of femininization. More subtly, however, this tone had what she described as a “softening effect” upon the older model of masculine femininity, which was associated with seriousness and rigidity.

³² Sevinç and Aksoy, *Hürrem Sultan*.

At first glance, the areas of hygiene, health, and sports appeared to be “safe ground” for women in their everyday practices of bodily care and beautification as they negotiated the new rubric of natural femininity. Rather than necessarily denoting the more masculinized ideal of pure physical strength, a healthy body could also signify the moral good of having better control of the body through the discipline of physical activity and fitness. In her research with the *başörtülü* (veiled) women, Sertaç Sehlukoğlu finds that these women use sports and physical fitness to challenge stereotypical representations of their bodies “by developing a self-confident body language.”³³ The values of self-confidence and self-esteem, also echoed by my interlocutors in Diyarbakır, connect such health and beauty practices up with neoliberal technologies of the making of a governable self. As in the case described by Sehlukoğlu in Istanbul, harmonizing inner and outer beauties and thereby becoming transparent to others (“self-reflexivity”) sets the ground for the biopower-producing force of beauty practices³⁴ that can then be deployed to forge a new Kurdish governmentality.

Such bodily changes are incremental and constantly negotiated within and through society. Hümeyra’s experiences and her observations of her customers reveal the uncertainties and fragilities involved in the process of becoming a new empowered Kurdish woman. Having witnessed the transformation of a number of women from what she termed a “masculine” to a more “feminine” look, she described the process in reference to social reactions to change.

It starts with the clothing. Initially [she wears] things that don’t attract attention. She may not have used makeup before. First, she starts to use

³³ Sehlukoğlu, “Female Bodies,” 128.

³⁴ Nguyen, “Biopower of Beauty.”

eyeliner because that's the least attention-grabbing. Next, she dons a skirt, starting with a long skirt. She may change things more quickly depending on people's reactions. If they're negative, she either stops at that point [of transformation] or retreats back into her shell (*kabuğuna çekilir*).

When I asked how she herself had experienced such an outward change in appearance, Hümeýra explained it in reference to her sense of self.

I never wore skirts before. How did I overcome that? I would wear it at home for a year, to familiarize myself with it, so I could be sure that it doesn't look strange on me, that I would not feel like a stranger to myself."

The comments of friends, family members, coworkers, other activists, and even an individual's own critical observations of herself all have a deep impact on the intimate processes involved in the arduous moral labor of such transformation. Thus, even when beautification discourses emphasize self-esteem, the construct of natural femininity can undermine the empowered subjectivity it purports to create and require.

Beautiful Acts: Building Moral Autonomies and Feminine Selves

One day as we were chatting at Gülnaz's salon, a customer rushed in. It soon became apparent that she was a close friend of Gülnaz, an activist working for a pro-Kurdish NGO. She complained about her busy schedule, which included a lot of traveling; only a few days before, she had been in a small town near the Syrian border where the Kurdish movement had set up camps for Syrian refugees. Gülnaz introduced me as a researcher, and I took the opportunity to

initiate conversation on the details of her work. She gave me a brief account about the impending victory of the Kurdish struggle and how the refugees would have suffered more had it not been for the movement's diligent support. In other words, she made it clear that she was not there to chat. She quickly asked Gülnaz to do "that service" they had talked about before. She was very busy, she said, but wanted to squeeze it in. Could they begin with it right away?

"That service" turned out to be a semi-permanent eyelash curl, a practice with which I was unfamiliar. She had to lie still for forty-five minutes while Gülnaz brushed her eyelashes with a special solution and then wrapped them around a tiny stick. Curled eyelashes, it emerged, constituted an especially subtle change in appearance that fit the requirement of modesty within the unspoken rulebook of natural femininity. In response to my questions about beauty and this particular practice, Gülnaz's activist friend would only repeat the official discourse of the harmony between inner and outer beauties, all the while sequestering her own practice from any signifying frame. All she would say is that it made her life "easier."

This activist's refusal to associate beauty with morality and politics reveals how irritating women's increasing social visibility is to this subgroup of politically engaged women. Beauty practices and talk about them has the power to eclipse their other, more morally valuable political labor because it threatens to represent them solely through their bodies and not through their political work. Yet it also reveals how, from the point of orthodox politics, beauty practices constitute a fuzzy realm in which women can encounter undue opportunities for divergence, evasion, or disloyalty. Kurdish women seem quite well aware that changing their bodies is not only about "making life easier;" it is also a practice that transforms their subjectivity. As feminist scholars have demonstrated, the body is not merely a blank object one can easily mold like clay. In her research on Islam in Java, Suzanne Brenner has shown that young women don the *jilbāb* in

order to become more pious individuals; the transformation of their bodies catalyzes a series of disciplinary mechanisms that gradually transform women's moralities, giving them a stronger sense of control over their bodies.³⁵ Similarly, in her research with veiled women in Istanbul, Banu Gökariksel argues that women "struggle with their bodies," construing the body as "an unruly space to be tamed and taught to be modest and pious."³⁶ Such practices end up maintaining the binary of inner and outer selves; physical beauty practices are thus able to go deeper into a realm that can easily escape the purview of rebel governance and remain below the radar.

For some women the at times forced and usually difficult transformation in attitudes toward beauty and the discourses of self-care that many found at first superficial did in fact initiate deeper questions about the Kurdish movement's ideals. Hümeýra for instance, complained about the formality in her everyday discursive encounters. In her politicized family there was little room for friendly and intimate discussions. Even at the age of forty-two, she could not bring herself to speak of menstruation with her mother, yet she could also not help getting "frustrated" when her nieces wanted to chat about their intimate lives. This formal approach to such gendered topics was, she said, a remnant of the older model of masculine femininity that Hümeýra had previously adopted and now criticized. She added that she was amazed how freely her nieces used "I" in their sentences. To Hümeýra, their use of the first-person point of view indexed assertiveness, individuality, and resoluteness that her militant self would not allow for. Despite my protests and our shared sense of friendship, she could not become informal with me; when

³⁵ Brenner, "Reconstructing Self," 683–85.

³⁶ Gökariksel, "Beyond the Officially Sacred," 665.

calling me up on the telephone, she would invariably use the formal “you” (*siz*) rather than the personal “you” (*sen*).

Time and again women of this generation criticized the old model of masculine femininity, pointing up the problems inherent to living a political life as a woman. Although assumed to be a matter of the past, this model of masculine femininity continued to dominate women’s lives in the era of visibility. Rüyâ, a thirty-eight year old doctor who was Diyarbakır born and bred with guerrillas in her extended family, kept in constant touch with the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy party through frequent party visits, attendance at protests, and activism within her profession. During our conversations, she frequently expressed her desire for private space in the city where she could be relieved of her political identity and be unmarked. She felt an omnipresent public gaze upon her that brought with it expectations and codes, exemplified by the desexualized stereotype of the politically active woman who displays exemplary conviction.

The “political sister” (*politik abla*) image bothers me. It’s something that sticks to you and overshadows so many things. Maybe you shut down my humorous side. That word has a mission.

Sexuality is an area of thorny moral negotiations. In the 1990s, the PKK banned sexual relationships and marriage for its members. By some accounts, related also in the academic literature, those breaking the prohibition were harshly punished with ousting and castigation.³⁷ While a taboo on sexuality in and outside marriage persists, current official PKK policy does not seem to be as strict. The party can even at times encourage its female members and Kurdish movement activists to get married and build a normal life, a pressure that is keenly felt. Some

³⁷ Weiss, “Falling from Grace.”

women are encouraged “to establish an arrangement” (*diizen kurmak*), a household life, as a way to normalize their lives. Others are compelled into childbearing out of a concern with the biological reproduction of the nation following losses during the war. If a family has lost several members, the survivors are expected to take on the responsibility of ensuring the survival the family line.

Because the Kurdish movement has yet to create a space in which to challenge male sexualities, some activist women choose to remain single as a conscious and direct criticism of the emerging culture of gender and sexuality in the movement.³⁸ Such a preference to remain single is, I argue, a morally autonomous act that rejects the obligatory norms of gender and sexuality in the form of marriage and childbearing. Nuriye explains her choice to remain single in relation to male sexuality and sexism.

As I told my sister, there’s nobody [to marry]. The good man chose his path and now he’s gone [i.e., he died as a guerrilla]. The man who survived looks only at these breasts of mine. Not at my face, not at my brain. At my ass while walking behind me. There are no exceptions. For them, women are sexual objects. There are no comradely relationships like before. The most revolutionary man [of today] is like that [sexist] when he is alone with you.

Nuriye’s categorization of men as sexually oppressive and her romanticization of the desexualized comrade relationships of the past is a widespread construct among the activist

³⁸ I use the verb “choose” deliberately here to acknowledge women’s position vis-a-vis the limiting conditions they find themselves in.

women I met. There were endless stories of men's objectification of the women, some of which involved Kurdish men choosing Turkish women because they were better groomed compared to activist Kurdish woman. An example of such tropes in the discourse was a popular shade of lighter blonde hair dye dubbed "revenge blonde" (*ihamet sarısı*), named for those Kurdish wives who dyed their hair blonde so as to mimic the women their husbands had cheated on them with. Such beauty talk indexed activist women's sense of men's unreliability and the moral deprivation that would follow from engaging with them. Hümeyra's pencil drawings of the taboo figures of the adulterer Ayşe Şan and a woman visibly enjoying sex indexed the autonomous subjectivity, and the social anxieties about it, such sexual acts implied.

Beautification is an unfixed process. In the context of a revolutionary and/or resistance movement that transitions to (rebel) governance, beautification can be a site of affective work with moral and political consequences. Beauty, as Rebecca Coleman and Mónica Moreno Figueroa argue, needs to be understood as a feeling and a process that can both reproduce and challenge gendered norms.³⁹ "Feeling beauty" might include "a return to and a recognition of the unfulfilled actuality of the present; a means of challenging the difficult present by re-experiencing the past."⁴⁰ In other words, beauty as a feeling has the power to face the limitations and possibilities of the present while also rewriting the script of the self. Coleman and Figueroa therefore locate feminist hope in a presentist beauty that is not oriented toward a future, better self, but toward a better self in the present.

³⁹ Coleman and Figueroa, "Past and Future Perfect?"

⁴⁰ Coleman and Figueroa, "Past and Future Perfect?," 371.

Feeling beautiful is important for Sema, a thirty-two-year-old municipality worker, in just this presentist way in that it functions as an impetus to transform herself into whoever she wants to become. We conducted two extended interviews a year apart, and in the second Sema was visibly different. She told me that this was the consequence of some trauma workshops she had attended where she had learned ways to “love herself.” If “it”—feeling beautiful—escaped her, she would tell herself, “Sema, you are not that person. Care for yourself in the way you want to see yourself in the mirror.” For her, this surface beauty was of prime importance. “I disseminate energy to others through my face. If something collapses in my soul, it reflects on my face.”⁴¹ Sema’s desire for a harmonious relationship between her inner and outer selves furthers the selfhood model that exists within Kurdish politics. While she projects a self that is conscious and in control, she is also aware that these attitudes are not ever-present and unwavering; they are rather feelings that she needs to actively produce.

An example of a moment where feelings about her newfound beauty become contextually murky involves the new role of miniskirts as a symbol of “radical beauty” within the Kurdish movement.⁴² During a visit to her village, Sema ran into some guerrillas. After a few exchanges, they told her, “You are a very good PKK member, but you wear miniskirts.” “Sometimes I like myself (*Bazen kendimi seviyorum*),” she responded. “Don’t load so much stuff on me (*O kadar*

⁴¹ Following Georg Simmel’s notion of the face as the expression of the soul, Saadia Abid notes how women of various backgrounds devote their bodily labors to the expression and shaping of their moral labor. See, Abid, “Identity in Alterity.”

⁴² For a discussion of gendered and misogynist tropes surrounding radical women in armed struggle, see O’Keefe, “Mini-Skirt Brigade.”

çok şey yapmayın bana)." The timid wording in her self-defense—"sometimes" (*bazen*) but not "always," "stuff" (*şey*) but not "pressure"—reflects her awareness of the moral autonomy represented by her act of beauty and the suspicion and moral reprobation it can arouse in others, particularly those tasked with guarding the moral order. Her emphasis on the feeling of self-love ("Sometimes I like myself") might be her way of "challenging [her] difficult present."⁴³ As an activist, Sema's refusal to engage in a conversation with the guerrillas about the political meanings of beauty or her feelings about it appears on the surface to be a disavowal of the challenges she faces in the political community of which she is a part. But beauty's evasive role in the autonomous moral technologies of the self is in fact not a contradiction; such evasive tactics are rather inherent to the social and political complexity of beauty and women's navigation of the choices to be made somewhere in between subordination and autonomy.

Difficult Presents

Kurdish women's beauty practices allow for a politico-moral space that is currently in flux and richer than the political discourse can contain. In that space, the codes and norms of Kurdish femininity are being redefined as modern, urban, and empowered. Throughout my analysis I have repeated the key value and the language the women themselves articulated by referring to this new Kurdish femininity as "natural femininity." But aspiring to be or become *natural* is a slippery and abstract enterprise; its immaterial nature constitutes both its negative and positive sides. While the ideal of naturalness can be a means of moral disciplining, it can also be made into a space for individuality, creativity, and self-care.

⁴³ Coleman and Figueroa, "Past and Future Perfect?"

The affective value of beauty, “sometimes I like myself” or the desire to not be “clownish” gradually enters into the everyday lives of the Kurdish activist women (and more slowly into the lives of men), in constant interaction with the new moral and political order that the Kurdish movement establishes. “Affective capital” is the term that Alvaro Jarrín uses for Brazil, to define the beauty’s power to create aesthetic hierarchies amid the pre-existing social and cultural ones with concrete effects in social and economic statuses.⁴⁴ Similarly, beauty circulates in Diyarbakır and beyond, across generations and classes, leaving no outside. A recent example of colorful scarves that are popularized as “guerrilla fashion” indicates that even the guerrilla sphere is (imagined to be) included in the routes of beauty. Furthermore, the affective power of beauty implicates both the trauma of war as well as the hopefulness of the postconflict.

Granted with such affective power, beauty practices are undertaken and promoted as a way to improve both individual and social bodies. The Kurdish movement’s vigorous defense of gender equity and the concomitant increase in women’s visibility both cater to a notion of unity. But during my research, although political unity was more or less sustained, moral unity was lacking. The resulting anxieties and communal tensions are reflected in women’s bodily labors, which posit a hegemonic idea of the harmony between inner and outer beauty.

In the fraught circumstances of a movement, society, and moral order in flux, to focus on moral autonomy through beautification is to explore the different meanings that beauty may entail. While beauty is most certainly mobilized for biopower and self-governance, it may also negotiate morally autonomous acts. As a useful feminist intervention, a focus on acts of moral autonomy may resist the reproduction of subordination-freedom binaries. So, too, may a focus on

⁴⁴ Jarrín, *The Biopolitics of Beauty*.

the autonomous acts of evasion and cynicism give us a broader picture of the moral terrain through which people must travel in order to make their decisions about whether to comply with or reject the moral order. As Weiss puts it, “Though loyalty, courage, friendship, self-realization, and other dimensions of responsibility may not be overtly political, they nevertheless have highly political ramifications.”⁴⁵

Because of the unpredictability and uncontrollability of moral dissent, noncompliance with the moral order has been a central concern of sovereign regimes. Acts of moral autonomy can create unease and mistrust, fueling fears of subversion as it “can also imply the autonomy to be amoral, immoral, and even mistaken.”⁴⁶ The fuzzy realm of moral becoming that Kurdish women’s beauty practices open up, including the possibility of suspicion and moral reprobation, invariably remains contingent upon the well-being of “the unity.” Since 2015, the collapse of the peace process and the resumption of armed conflict has intensified anxieties regarding the future of the Kurdish polity and has once again fortified the position of the guerrillas and their old models of moral selfhood. In that context, an imagined unity dominates the possibilities for visible autonomies. In the meantime, gestures toward the “immorality” of autonomous acts, like those depicted in Hümeyra’s drawings, are a reminder of those everyday practices that make for a better present.

⁴⁵ Jarrín, *The Biopolitics of Beauty*, 432.

⁴⁶ Kelly, “Citizenship, Cowardice, and Freedom,” 718.

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