Haunting juxtapositions: gender, Covid-19 and the conservative modern

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Abstract: Feminist scholarship on the Middle East has often critiqued binaristic framings of gender rights which draw on Western-centric tropes of cosmopolitan modernity versus local backwardness. What I argue, through examining visual mediations of Covid-19 on Iranian social media, is that gender is reconfigured in this context as part of a nationalism that is both modernising and conservative. I particularly focus on how montage - a modernist visual genre - is utilised in the production of an Iranian national security imaginary which combines a rhetoric of modern, mixed-gender medical care with haunting resonances of male martyrdom and sacrifice during the Iran-Iraq war. While much has been written recently about Covid and national security, what is less discussed is how particularistic narratives of crisis can produce innovative reconfigurations of gender and modernity. Yet while Benjamin envisaged montage as a weapon in the destruction of aura, here, I argue, the deployment of aura supports the state's 'capture' of haunting affects as it seeks to re-shape national memory. What this suggests is that crisis permits a conditional shifting of gender roles, but this move is legitimated through the invocation of a redemptive history, wherein the nation re-emerges triumphant out of disaster.

Keywords: Covid19 and popular culture, Iran, mediation and nationalism, visual genre, transnational feminism

Feminist scholarship on the Middle East and the wider global South has often critiqued binaristic framings of gender rights which draw on the Western-centric tropes of cosmopolitan modernity versus local backwardness (L.Abu-Lughod 2013; S. Khoja-Moolji 2018; S. Mahmood 2009). What I argue, through examining visual mediations of Covid-19 on Iranian social media, is that gender is reconfigured in this context as part of a nationalism that is both modernising and conservative. I particularly focus on how a visual genre associated with the modernist avant-garde is utilised in the production of a new Iranian national security imaginary which combines a rhetoric of modern, mixed-gender medical care with haunting

resonances of male martyrdom and sacrifice, drawn from the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88. While there has been much written in recent months about the connection between Covid, war and national security in state discourses (for example, M. James and S. Valluvan 2020; K.L. Schwartz and O. Gölz 2020), what is less discussed is how nationally particularistic narratives of crisis can produce innovative configurations of gender and modernity, and how this particularism, while atavistic, may depend upon the constant production of the new in order to secure a significant acceptance of its hegemony.[1]

When videos went 'viral' on Western social media of Iranian health workers - both female nurses and female and male doctors - dancing while wearing full PPE, this was widely celebrated as showing the Iranian people defying both the virus and their own government (The Guardian 2020). The dancers' immediate intention was to boost the morale both of fellow health workers and of hospital patients suffering from Covid. As a prominent Iranian women's right's campaigner tweeted, the dancing showed a 'lively human spirit' (M. Alinejad 2020); moreover, this dancing was deemed to combine self-expression with compassion and care for others. The reception of these videos outside Iran, I argue, can be situated in the Western-centric modernisation framework abovementioned, in which human spontaneity, especially women's (sexual) self-expression is enabled, through media affordances, temporarily to escape the restrictions on behaviour imposed by the Islamic Republic, including the official disapproval of women dancing.[2] This feeds into the narrative that the Iranian population, especially women, want to rejoin the

[1] Several feminist studies have examined the reinvention of gendered nationalism in the context of the pandemic (for example, C. Agius et al., 2020), but my specific focus is the combination of modernising and atavistic discourses in one such formation.

[2] Media in the Middle East have often been viewed as drivers of unilinear modernisation. See D. Matar and E. Bessaiso 2012, also E. Gheytanchi 2015.

rest of the world, now united in combating the corona pandemic. In this familiar narrative of modern and non-modern, West and non-West, the Islamic Republic stands for all that is anti-modern and anti-liberal (Radio Liberty 2020).

Figure 1. Cartoon (origin unknown: reposted on multiple Farsi-language platforms, accessed 23 March 2020).

Admittedly, an image such as Figure 1, which went viral on Twitter, feeds into such binaristic narratives, offering a narrative of national security which frames male and female roles in highly normative terms. The cartoon shows the coronavirus as a foreign invader, hand-in-hand with a muscle-bound thug representing US imperialism; they combine to menace an Iranian policeman, who in turn protects a scarf-wearing woman and child. Renewed US-led economic sanctions have placed a crushing burden once again on Iranian medical facilities, including shortages of medical equipment and PPE in

facilities which were already degraded under the severe sanctions from 2010.[3] Here, the trope of national defence against imperialism is underpinned by a conventional narrative of home and family as objects of male protectiveness.

What I concentrate on here, however, is an emerging genre of images on Iranian social media, in which the Covid crisis is mobilised to both invoke the national past, and to partially reconfigure gender normativities in the present. This genre, which I term a juxtaposition genre, sets images from the 1980-88 war with Iraq alongside images of contemporary medical professionals, in effect drawing comparisons between present and past moments of threat to the national body/bodies. Such paired juxtapositions, examples of which are repeatedly reposted across different platforms, often seem to be from official sources.[4] It is important to consider what montage as a visual device does and does not do in this context. Montage, a technique classically associated with modernism and the leftist avant-garde, was celebrated by Walter Benjamin as bringing two realities into clashing confrontation. Its classic function was to shock the viewer into wakefulness, provoking them to become critically aware of capitalist social reality (W. Benjamin 1968). Yet in the present case, I argue, montage is used not in the service of the "modern" in a leftist sense, but as part of the spectacular (re)production of the Islamic Republic, united against internal and external foes.[5] This work of re-imagining the nation legitimates the "modern" by situating the work of medical teams in relation to a haunting and violent history, in the shape of

[3] A popular Twitter hashtag in Farsi runs: "Sanctions spread Covid-19." See, for example, Rezaei (2017) on the impact of the previous Obama-era multilateral sanctions that were partially lifted in 2015 .
[4] See Figure 4.
[5] S.T. Kriebel and A.M. Zervigón (2019) voice anxiety that the critical function of photomontage in its leftist variant has been usurped on digital media by the 'nefarious' forces of consumerism and right-wing populism.

a war which emerges in the narrative of the state as the pinnacle of pious self-sacrifice. This militarising rhetoric is so all-pervasive, I propose, that it perversely allows a partial discursive re-configuring of women's roles.

Figure 2. Montage showing (left) Iranian soldiers, Iran-Iraq war, 1980-88; (right) Iranian health workers, early 2020 (reposted on multiple platforms, accessed 23 March 2020).

Such re-configuring is made possible, in Figure 2, precisely through the affordances of the juxtaposition genre, whereby an everyday scene is here lent the *aura* of a different space and time, against Benjamin's expectation that montage would de-mystify and destroy aura. For the most part, in this genre, the juxtapositions between past and present are clearly signalled by the differences between the coloured image, associated with and signifying the present, and sepia or black-and-white image which comes to signify the recent national past. The boundary between the two images is usually in the form of a slashing diagonal line, which in the visual language of leftist montage signified the shock of modernity - but here seems to represent the haunting return of the violent past. In Figure 2,

male and female health workers in full PPE are placed next to soldiers from the 1980-88 war wearing masks against a different respiratory threat, that of an Iraqi gas attack. Placed next to the soldiers, the health workers can be read as helping to form serried “ranks” of bodies, which span past and present to present a united front, an embodied border, against the foreign invader. In becoming militarised, in being cast as the frontline of the “war” against the virus, it is clear that, in one sense, the contribution of medicine has been (re)masculinised. Yet what is also apparent is that women take their place on this “frontline”; their contribution is also made visible.

Figure 3. Montage: (left) Iranian soldiers during the battle of Khorramshahr, photograph by Saeed Sadegh, 1982; (right) Iranian health worker wearing mask, early 2020, captioned “the devotion and sacrifices of nurses”, IRNA News Agency (reposted on multiple platforms, accessed 23 March 2020).

In another similarly composed montage (Figure 3), a female health worker from the

present appears to stride firmly, in a “masculine” way, into the historical past, her leg crossing the visual-temporal boundary in order to aid, or to walk with, the wounded male soldier from the 1982 battle of Khorramshahr, when the invading Iraqi army was ejected from an Iranian border town at heavy cost (P. Razoux 2015). Again, the bodies of male soldiers and female health worker, more or less on the same plane, form a “rank” that confronts and moves towards the viewer, allowing the past to exist in dynamic relation with the present. Notably, in this image, the bodies and heads of the female health workers are “modestly” covered, but in the context, they appear de-gendered or even masculinised. For example, medical masks may be seen as de-gendering the women, where male health workers are also wearing these items; or masks may function to masculinise women, in images where they are juxtaposed with male soldiers wearing gas masks.

Figure 4. Poster: “Mother of Ali” placing headband on female health worker (source: Dezful Governorate; accessed 23 March 2020)

In Figure 4, the female health worker, wearing full PPE, actually occupies the place which was formerly occupied by a male military volunteer. Nonetheless, as the caption of this official poster tells us, “The trench is the same trench, the people are the same people. #We are defeating corona.” The older woman is tying the headband with its devout slogan around the health worker’s head, just as she would do for a soldier about to go into battle (Schwartz and Gölz, 2020). Yet the boundary between past and present is deliberately blurred, the juxtaposition less insistent. Is the older woman in the same space and time as the chadori women in the 1980s street demonstration in the background, or is she in the present with the health worker? In a sense, both, but her age tells the viewer that it must primarily be the latter. She is the famous “Mother of Ali”, whose 15-year-old son became a martyr during the war with Iraq. In these montages, women are conditionally offered places in a narrative shaped by men - a narrative of militarisation, of fighting the enemy, with older women cast as mothers of the nation who wish to protect the nation’s offspring, while younger women put themselves in danger. But the militarised “frontline” position of the latter paradoxically depends upon their status as “caring” professionals, a role that is invoked, as much as it is disavowed, in the militarising rhetoric.

The Covid crisis in this sense allows and simultaneously redeems a partial unmaking and redoing of gender, which recognises that modern women and men suffering for the Islamic Republic are a different generation from the men and women who suffered during the 1980s war - but that the “trench” is the same, that

the Republic is the same, and that this Republic provides the overarching narrative framework that connects past and present, sepia and colour, life and death. Benjamin envisaged montage as a weapon in the destruction of the sacred aura of a scene or object - pulling the object out of its familiar context and placing it in another, in order to challenge the viewer to think otherwise. Here, the familiar everyday, in the sense of hospital work and its representations on social media, is indeed de-familiarised by being set against a violent and spectral past, but this has the effect of recreating rather than stripping away aura. Hence a larger normativity is re-imposed, in which the deployment of aura supports the state's "capture" of haunting affects as it seeks to re-shape national memory (J. Auchter 2014). What the use of montage suggests, here, is that crisis permits a conditional shifting of gender roles, but this move is legitimated through the invocation of a continuous and redemptive history, wherein the nation re-emerges triumphant out of disaster.

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