

5 Fatima's Apparition

Power Relations within Female Ritual Spaces

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

This *mullāya* in Kuwait was referring to Fatima al-Zahra', the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, the wife of the first Shi'i imam, Ali, and the mother of the two imams Hasan and Husayn. Within Shi'i Islam, she is regarded as the most holy of Muslim women, sinless and in a state of perpetual purity (*tahāra*), occupying thereby an exceptional position.¹ She is presented as a "prerequisite for imitable sainthood"² whose femininity as a daughter, wife, and mother are taken as a socio-ethical exemplar of the "best of women" (*khayr al-nisā'*).³ In women-only *majālis*, Fatima is presented as a creation that embodies moral and esoteric significance, who is believed to exercise power to heal and intercede on the Day of Judgment (*shafā'a*) and as the "mistress of the women of the two worlds" (*sayyidat nisā' al-'ālamayn*), able to physically appear in our world as well as in the afterlife.

Although the belief that members of *ahl al-bayt* appear to Shi'is in *majālis* is widespread, there is no extensive academic study of these phenomena.⁴ The apparition of Fatima during Shi'i ritual practices

¹ See Beinhauer-Köhler, *Fatima bint Muhammad*. See also within the South-East Asian context: Chiara Formichi and Michael Feener, eds, *Shi'ism in South East Asia: Alid Piety and Sectarian Constructions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

² Karen G. Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 59.

³ Ruffle, "May Fatimah Gather Our Tears," 387.

⁴ *Ahl al-bayt* also appear to Shi'is in dreams. See Marcia Hermansen, "Dreams and Dreaming in Islam," in *Dreams: A Reader on Religious, Cultural, and Psychological Dimensions of Dreaming*, edited by Kelly Bulkeley (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 73–92; Vehia Gouda, *Dreams and Their Meaning in the Old Arab Tradition* (New York: Vantage Press, 1991); Iain Edgar, *The Dream in Islam: From Qur'anic Tradition to Jihadist Inspiration* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011); Yogesh Snehi, "Dreaming Baba, Resituating Memory: Popular Sufi Shrines and the Historiography of Contemporary

witnessing the mourners and collecting their tears is only marginally mentioned in academic studies.⁵ Fatima died before the battle of Karbala. She is, however, believed to have visited the plains of Karbala after her son Imam Husayn was killed and, since then, to visit the commemoration gatherings of Shi'is around the world to bear witness to the collective commemoration of the killing of her son. They believe Fatima to be the patroness of the *majālis*, who is present to witness Imam Husayn's supporters while mourning his death in ritual gatherings: "Cry Shi'is of Ali, cry. Fatima is watching you. Show her your grief for Husayn's death. Show her your pain," as one of the *mullāyāt* urged the women in one of the *majālis* I attended in London.⁶ These tears of the believer will prove their loyalty to Imam Husayn and support Fatima, who is referred to as *al-Manṣūra* ("the one who is Victorious in God"), when she intercedes on behalf of the believers on the Day of Judgment.

Shirazis claim that because of their adherence to authentic Shi'i Islam, Fatima visits their *majālis* in particular. This special connection to Fatima is also used to legitimize the Shirazi religious and political approach despite significant opposition to them. In London, Kuwait, and

East Punjab," *Anthropology of the Contemporary Middle East and Central Eurasia* 2, no. 1 (2014), 3–24; Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Dreams and Visions in the World of Islam: A History of Muslim Dreaming and Foreknowing* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015); Dwight Reynolds, "Symbolic Narratives of Self: Dreams in Medieval Arabic Autobiographies," in *On Fiction and Adab in Medieval Arabic Literature*, edited by P. Kennedy (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 261–286; Robert Rozehnal, "Flashes of Ultimate Reality: Dreams of Saints and Shrines in a Contemporary Pakistani Sufi Community," *Anthropology of the Contemporary Middle East and Central Eurasia* 2, no. 1 (2014), 67–80; Amira Mittermaier, "How to Do Things with Examples: Sufis, Dreams, and Anthropology," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21, S. 1 (2015), 129–143; Amira Mittermaier, "(Re) Imagining Space: Dreams and Saint Shrines in Egypt," in *Dimensions of Locality: Muslim Saints, Their Place and Space*, edited by G. Stauth and S. Schielke (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008), 47–66.

⁵ Ruffle, "May Fatimah Gather Our Tears"; Pinault, *Horse of Karbala*; and Mary F. Thurlkill, "Chosen among Women: Mary and Fatima in Medieval Christianity and Shi'ite Islam," *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan* 14, no. 2 (2007), 27–51, to mention just a few.

⁶ Pinault, making similar observations, explains: "Fatima is spiritually present at every *majlis* during Muharram; *matam* performed at the end of a *majlis* will lead her to intercede with God on behalf of the *matamdar*: she will be moved to intercession by the degree of devotion to her son Husayn shown by the individual mourner." See Pinault, *The Shi'ites*, 103, 106. "Even while in Paradise Fatima is believed to grieve continuously for Husayn and to descend to earth to be spiritually present at every lamentation gathering held in remembrance of her son." See Pinault, *Horse of Karbala*, 62. Ruffle explains: "The mourners' tears alleviate Fatimah's grief and pain, because the *majlis* is proof that she is not alone in remembering the violence that has been committed against her family and religion. These tears are Fatimah's sustenance." Ruffle, "May Fatimah Gather Our Tears," 393.

Bahrain, Sunni women visited Shirazi *majālis* to witness the appearance of Fatima. A woman in London explains:

We [Lebanese Sunnis] have always taken part in Shi'i *majālis* and we believe in the unique position of Fatima within Islam. If I can be in the same room with her why not? I have been coming to this *majlis* for a while and I had the honor to see her as everybody else here.

Another Iraqi Sunni in Kuwait highlights: "Fatima is Fatima, there is no Sunni or Shi'i. I love the Shirazis, they have been our neighbors for years and years and they love us."

Shirazi-specific ritual practices transcend inner-Islamic, intra-sectarian, and transnational boundaries. This is an unusual perception of Shirazis, who usually exhibit a strong anti-Sunni sectarian approach (see Yasser Habib, mentioned in Chapter 1). Having Sunni women in the gathering is openly celebrated within the *majlis* and is used to support the ongoing narrative of being unique as a Shirazi group. A woman in London explains:

Women are coming from everywhere, every religion, every religious group, every nationality, every country. Yes, we are attacked and so many do not agree on what we do ... cutting and burning ourselves but Fatima comes to us not to the one at the end of the street ... and my Sunni friend here, she comes to us also not to the one at the end of the street.

In one of the *majālis* in Kuwait, a Sunni woman says: "If Fatima would not approve the Shirazis why is she always here? Why does she keep coming to them? There must be a reason?"

As has been illustrated in earlier chapters of this book, Shirazi women have entered male-dominated ritual spaces through participating in rituals, such as *taṭbīr* and walking on hot coals, traditionally regarded as male practices. In order to support their claim for an equal right to perform these specific practices, Shirazi women, as we have seen, have revisited Shi'i history and historical accounts of specific Shi'i female figures such as Zaynab. Not only *taṭbīr* but also walking on hot coals has increasingly been practiced among female Shi'is in the United Kingdom and various countries in the Gulf. All of these fairly new practices among women have contributed to the increasing hostility toward Shirazis both within and outside the Shi'i community. This has also caused occasional alienation within the Shirazi communities, leading to heated discussions about the legitimacy of Shirazi practices and, more importantly, the authenticity of Shirazis. Fatima's apparitions have helped *mullāyāt* to combat doubts regarding the increasing female participation in what have traditionally been regarded as male-dominated

ritual spaces. These apparitions help the *mullāyāt* to sustain the distinct factional identity of the Shirazis and to legitimize their claim to Shi'i authenticity. Such appearances provide women with the "living" approval of their practices, supported by the charismatic figure of Fatima. This chapter will demonstrate how Fatima's apparition is used as a medium for intercommunal gender role change in women's increasing involvement in ritual practices as well as in public prosocial actions. The tradition of apparition has a long history in Christianity, but is hardly discussed within Shi'i Islam, particularly not in relation to apparitions of Fatima. Nevertheless, there is a number of parallels between the apparition of Fatima and the Virgin Mary, as will be discussed in this chapter. I will start by highlighting the importance of the figure of Fatima for Shi'is, followed by an overview of the characteristics and wider socio-political and religious context of Marian apparitions, moving later to discuss and analyze Fatima's apparition within Shi'i Islam.

5.1 The Importance of Fatima

During my long and intensive ethnographic research among Shi'i women's communities in different geographical contexts, I have come across a number of incidents and heard various accounts of women witnessing the appearance of Fatima during a ritual gathering. This first-hand experience of Fatima's apparition is a way of symbolizing the sacred and ways of practicing and assuring an exceptional and "true faith" for many women. Within Shi'i Islam, Fatima occupies a distinctive social and religious standing that is emphasized most in the narrative of her creation. *Mullāyāt* highlight the exceptional position of Fatima within Islam, referring to God's creative act in which Fatima received a share of divine light equal to Muhammad. The chronological order of their creation plays an important role. They highlight the narrative that Ali and the other twelve imams were created after Fatima and had to share one-third of God's light. Fatima, on the contrary, received a larger portion.⁷ Some sources place Fatima on the level of the first of creation, highlighting her primordial formation: Fatima was created first. Her divine light was then transferred from her to the imams – a narrative

⁷ Ruffle worked extensively on Fatima. See for example Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism*; Ruffle, "An Even Better Creation: The Role of Adam and Eve in Shi'i Narratives about Fatimah al-Zahra," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 3 (September 2013), 791–819; Ruffle, "May Fatimah Gather Our Tears," 386–397.

supported by many Shirazis.⁸ The Prophet's daughter is portrayed with the male members of the Prophet's family as closer to God. She is also regarded as one of the fourteen infallibles (*ma'sūmīn*), which include Muhammad, Fatima, and the twelve imams.⁹ She is portrayed as a pre-eternal being and a transcendent figure whose generative light (*nūr*)¹⁰ is the source of prophecy and the Imamate.

This narrative of Fatima's creation forms the foundation for her position in Shi'i Islam as an extraordinary enactment of feminine sanctity. For many women, Fatima's central position is a confirmation of their right to increase their involvement in religious, social, and political actions for the sake of securing a better Shi'i community. Fatima's appearances during mourning rituals are, as others have highlighted,¹¹ a way to secure her intercession on the Day of Judgment. As the following will demonstrate, it also has wider intra-communal and political but also gendered dimensions. Fatima's apparitions are used to challenge specific communal agendas,¹² particularly around gender. The idea that Fatima, the only woman who is one of the first creations, is the one who visits the *majālis*, protects the Shi'is, and records who mourns the death of her sons, eventually interceding on behalf of that

⁸ Rubin cites this tradition from the *Ilal al-Sharā'ī* (The Laws Explained) of Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi (d. 381/991), in whose writings "the Fatima legend, in its essential characteristics, already [found] its completion." Verena Klemm, "Image Formation of an Islamic Legend: Fatima, the Daughter of the Prophet Muhammad," in *Ideas, Images and Methods of Portrayal. Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam*, edited by Sebastian Günther (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 181–208 (197); Uri Rubin, "Pre-Existence and Light – Aspects of the Concept of Nur Muḥammad," *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975), 62–119 (102) [Reprinted in Uri Rubin, *Muhammad the Prophet and Arabia, Variorum Collected Studies Series 4* (Ashgate, 2011)].

⁹ Her epithet Fatima al-Zahra' ("the radiant, the shining, the bright") refers to Fatima as the light which is believed to be God's source that gives the imams and the *khamisa* (Fatima, Muhammad, Ali, Hasan, and Husayn) their infallibility. Beinhauer-Köhler, *Fatima bint Muhammad*, 104–106. Fatima is also referred to in *Surat al-Nūr* in the Qur'an. She is part of the *awliyā'*. According to Beinhauer-Köhler, the *khamisa* refers to Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hassan, and Husayn. Beinhauer-Köhler, *Fatima bint Muhammad*, 110–111.

¹⁰ Rubin, "Pre-Existence and Light," 102. Fatima's divine luminosity follows her from before creation to postapocalyptic heaven. Sa'im Chishti, *Al-Batul (The Chaste Virgin)* (Faisalabad, Pakistan: Chishti Kutub Khaneh, 2005), 390.

¹¹ Ruffle, "May Fatimah Gather Our Tears"; Pinault, *Horse of Karbala*; Thurlkill, "Chosen among Women," 27–51.

¹² See within other religious contexts, Phillip W. Davis and Jacqueline Boles, "Pilgrim Apparition Work: Symbolization and Crowd Interaction. When the Virgin Mary Appeared in Georgia," *Georgia State University Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 32, no. 4 (August 2003), 371–402.

person on the Day of Judgment, provides women with a sense of authority and power within their communities.¹³

5.2 Apparitions

Apparitions in Christianity are a form of miracle¹⁴ that are collectively shared and used to challenge and threaten, to a certain extent, ecclesiastical hierarchies.¹⁵ The topic of apparitions has a long history within Christianity and is discussed widely by scholars.¹⁶ Marian apparitions have been linked particularly to repentance and healing of the ill.¹⁷ Sites all over the world have witnessed series of apparitions such as the one in Lourdes, where it is believed that Mary appeared to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858. The spot where Mary was seen turned to a miraculous spring, which thousands of believers visit in the hope of being cured and blessed.¹⁸

An increase in Marian apparitions have been also noticed after specific political, socioreligious, and ethnic crises and conflicts followed by

¹³ Regarding spiritual authority, Thurlkill explains: "By appropriating the image of Mary and Fatima to their own circumstance, it seems many women succeeded in gaining some amount of spiritual authority." Thurlkill, *Chosen among Women*, 121.

¹⁴ Nada al-Hudaid, "Karamah ('Marvel'): An Exploration of the Literal and Ethnographic Meaning of Miracles among Shi'a Female Artists in Kuwait," *World Art* 10, no. 1 (2020), 145–159, doi:10.1080/21500894.2020.1735502; Stefano Bigliardi, "The Interpretation of Miracles According to Mutahhari and Golshani: Comparative and Critical Notes," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 6, no. 3 (2013), 261–288; Stefano Bigliardi, "Above Analysis and Amazement: Some Contemporary Muslim Characterizations of 'Miracle' and Their Interpretation," *Sophia* 53, no. 1 (2013), 113–129; Sirriyeh, *Dreams and Visions in the World of Islam*; Amira Mittermaier, "Dreams and the Miraculous," in *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Middle East*, edited by Sorya Altorki (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 107–124; Harun Yahya, *Miracles of the Qur'an* (Scarborough, Ontario: Al-Attique Publishers, 2001); David Thomas, "The Miracles of Jesus in Early Islamic Polemic," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 39, no. 2 (1994), 221–243.

¹⁵ Erich Goode, *Collective Behavior* (Fort Worth, TX: Saunders College Pub, 1992).

¹⁶ See William A. Christian, *Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), William A. Christian, *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Ralph Della Cava and John Della Cava, *Miracle at Joazeiro* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970).

¹⁷ Shi'is also turn to Fatima to seek healing from illnesses. See Beinbauer-Köhler, *Fatima bint Muhammad*.

¹⁸ See Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (London: Allen Lane, 1999); Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: From la Salette to Medjugorje* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Theodore Mangiapan, *Lourdes: Miraculous Cures* (Lourdes: Lourdes Medical Bureau, 1997); Patrick Theillier, *Lourdes: Wenn man von Wundern spricht [When One Speaks of Miracles]* (Augsburg: Sankt-Ulrich, 2003); Thurlkill, "Chosen among Women."

changes in society.¹⁹ As Margry explains, “shifts in ideological, social, and ecclesiastical paradigms in Europe after the Second World War” influenced the increased appearance of the Virgin Mary.²⁰ Visionaries and their adherents used her appearance to deal with socioreligious and economic changes in society.²¹ The growing interest in Marian apparitions is linked to people’s anxieties about change.²² Her appearance is believed to support individuals and institutions to cope with these changes and find redemption.²³

The Virgin Mary’s apparitions are very often linked to nationalist discourses.²⁴ Skrbish argues that the “apparitional phenomenon is constantly caught up in the antagonistic tension between the universalistic Christian appeal of the Virgin’s messages and the possibility of its particularistic/local appropriations, such as in nationalism.”²⁵ The figure of the Virgin Mary highlights the exceptionality of a certain religious group over others. Narratives of “being chosen by Mary” also feed into a larger narrative of “being a chosen nation.”²⁶ With the influx of spectators, including from other Christian denominational groups from abroad coming to witness the apparition of the Virgin Mary, the experience transcends exclusivist national interpretations.²⁷ Marian apparitions

¹⁹ Peter Jan Margry, “Marian Interventions in the Wars of Ideology: The Elastic Politics of the Roman Catholic Church on Modern Apparitions,” *History and Anthropology* 20, no. 3 (2009), 243–263.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 261. She also explains that apparitions in 1967 in Egypt were a search for dignity after losing the war against Israel.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² E. Ann Matter, “Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the Late Twentieth Century: Apocalyptic, Representation, Politics,” *Religion* 31, no. 2 (2001), 125–153.

²³ Margry, “Marian Interventions in the Wars of Ideology”; Matter, “Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the Late Twentieth Century”; Davis and Boles, “Pilgrim Apparition Work.”

²⁴ See as examples: Victor Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by Edith Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978); Nicholas Perry, *Under the Heel of Mary*, edited by Loreto Echeverría (London: Routledge, 1988); Eric R. Wolf, “The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol,” *Journal of American Folklore* 71, no. 279 (1958), 34–39; Grzegorz Sokół, “Matska Boska Cześćochowsha Jako Polski Symbol Narodowy,” *Konteksty* 1–2 (2002), 120–125; Thomas A. Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Linda B. Hall, *Mary, Mother and Warrior: The Virgin in Spain and the Americas*, edited by Teresa Eckmann (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Anna Niedźwiedz, *Obraz i postać: Znaczenia wizerunku Matki Boskiej Częstochowskiej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2005); Everard Meade, *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940*, edited by Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis (Durham, NC: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

²⁵ Zlatko Skrbish, “The Apparitions of Virgin Mary of Medjugorje: The Convergence of Croatian Nationalism and her Apparitions,” *Nations and Nationalism* 11, no. 3 (2005), 443–461 (458).

²⁶ *Ibid.* ²⁷ *Ibid.*

represent both local and global meaning, causing an "emotional intensity"²⁸ that transcends any religious and national particularism.

The accounts of the appearance of Fatima among Shirazi women communities echo developments in relation to Marian apparitions of transcending exclusivist national interpretations.²⁹ Fatima is presented to appear only to Shi'is (inner-communal power dynamics) and only to chosen Shi'is (intra-communal power dynamics). Narratives of being chosen by Fatima highlight the Shirazis' positioning among the larger Shi'i communities that, for various political and socioreligious reasons, either condemn Shirazis' practices or distance themselves from them. As one of the Shirazi *mullāyāt* in London explains: "Other Shi'i groups are too lenient toward Sunnis and try to be overtly politically correct. This is why they [other Shi'i groups] condemn our practices." Fatima's apparition serves as a legitimization of specific Shirazi ritual practices, strengthening thereby their position within the larger Shi'i community and leading to the transnational spread of their practices among various communities. Shirazi women in the *majālis* I attended in Europe and the Middle East not only use the image of Fatima as a tool of empowerment but also as a declaration of true faith articulated in their "true Shi'iness" that distinguishes them from other Shi'i groups.

5.3 Apparitions within Shi'i Islam: *Ẓuhūr Fatima*

Opinions on her actual physical presence in a *majlis* vary; some believe she is present at all mourning gatherings but others – and they were the majority – believe she only comes if a *majlis* is special or if there is a reason or purpose for her to be present. A *mullāya* in London explains: "Yes, her soul is with us all the time. There is no *majlis* she does not know about. She knows everyone who is mourning the death of her son Imam Husayn. But she only comes out to the special ones." Similar statements have been made by other *mullāyāt* in Kuwait and Bahrain. Fatima watches over the *majālis* and takes note of every single believer expressing loyalty to *ahl al-bayt* through weeping and participating in mourning rituals remembering the battle of Karbala and the oppression and injustice leveled against *ahl al-bayt*. As a woman in London explains, Fatima can be present either as an observer or as a participant:

I saw her sometimes sitting with us in a *majlis*. She was so beautiful, pure, and special. Everyone saw her – you could not miss her. She would sit at the corner

²⁸ Ibid., 445.

²⁹ Lofland argues within the context of apparitions that what is important is how people define a situation. See Lofland, "Collective Behavior."

mourning with a special voice, a unique voice. We all heard her pain; it was a lifetime experience. Her presence was felt strongly in the room.

In Kuwait, I was invited to attend a semi-private *majlis* that Fatima is believed to attend frequently. The very young *mullāya* gave an eloquent memorial lecture and powerful recitation of devotional mourning poetry. The *mullāya* comes from a traditional Shi'ī clerical family known for its long history of female *mullāyāt*. In mourning gatherings, there is usually a gradual increase of emotions expressed through an increase in weeping and self-hitting; mourners become louder in their repetition of poetry until finally reaching the peak of mourning expressed through self-hitting or other forms of mourning expressions. At this particular *majlis*, however, the peak of the *majlis* was immediate. There was no gradual increase of emotions but rather an instant outbreak of collective grief. The atmosphere was extraordinary, providing participants with a unique emotional experience, as one young woman highlights: "You can go anywhere you like. But you will never experience something like that anywhere." Another woman warned me before entering the *majlis*: "Be prepared. What you are going to see inside here you have never seen before," and jokingly added: "Don't run away though!" At this particular *majlis*, women believed Fatima was mourning in their midst. She was believed not to be silently mourning in the corner, but to be right at the center of the *majlis*, jumping and hitting her head intensively and continuously along with all the other participants. After the *majlis*, one of the women, still in an agitated state, screamed at me saying: "Have you seen her? She was right in the middle with us. She was there. We proved our allegiance and love to Imam Husayn, our love. Yes, she was there." Another woman next to her added: "The ground was shaking from our feet hitting and stamping on it. We shook this world and cracked it open for Her [Fatima] to come out to us and join us in our sorrow for Imam Husayn." Later that day I had a conversation with another woman who had participated in the same mourning ritual who pointed out the exceptionality of this particular *majlis*, which is known not only in Kuwait but also abroad. The *mullāya*'s religious and social capital is important within the context of apparitions that transcend national boundaries. It is about Shirazis' way of mourning and its religious and political standing among Shi'īs in general that is crucial: When I was in Bahrain, young Shi'ī women praised that particular *mullāya* and added that they would regularly travel to Kuwait just to attend her *majlis*. A woman in Bahrain explains: "She does not seem to need any effort in holding a *majlis*. It comes naturally. This is what we love about her. She speaks from her heart. This is a *mullāya* who is gifted right from birth." The women

believe that it is the genuine nature of that particular *majlis* that attracts Fatima to come to witness the authentic and strong emotions that are expressed for the memory of the killing of her son Husayn.

Fatima, as Ruffle explains, is the "embodiment of transcendent sainthood."³⁰ Among the Shirazi women in this study, however, this sanctity becomes human, real, and close to the believer through her physical appearance. In other words, Fatima's apparitions make her a more approachable and imitable saintly figure. This is important, since ritual practices rely heavily on recalling particular narratives from Shi'i history and religious Shi'i figures that are to a great extent abstract. Objects that are attributed to specific religious meaning, by individuals or collectives, help believers to materialize their belief. Fatima's apparition represents both her physical and spiritual body, signifying thereby, as Thurlkill explains, "the ever-immaculate vessel for the Imamate."³¹

Apparitions add another level of materiality and religious connectivity and approachability between the Shi'i believer and their religiosity: "Have you seen the woman in the black 'abāya?," "Have you heard the women next to you sobbing loudly?," or "Have you seen the women with the dusty feet?" are some of the questions women raise when talking about the apparition of Fatima. I was told that the dusty feet refer to Fatima's visit to the desert plains of Karbala after her son Husayn was killed. Women also refer to Fatima's extraordinary smell: "Have you noticed the smell in the room? It is Fatima's smell brought down from paradise." Specific shared images are established³² and, in combination with social interaction, meaning is attributed to them and a collective confirmation of Fatima's appearance is generated. The process of meaning-making is what contributes to the development of narratives around apparitions. When listening to Shi'i women's accounts on seeing Fatima and mourning with her, the women construct a narrative of a collective vision and shared imagination. Usually a particular symbol or imagery is constructed, such as a smell, that builds up to a collective narrative with a shared meaning. The collective in this process plays a huge role in building a sensorialized sociality around the figure of Fatima. Women construct an environment of symbols, proving or legitimizing a spiritual presence represented in the figure of Fatima. Meaning is thereby

³⁰ Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism*, 83.

³¹ Thurlkill, "Chosen among Women," 43.

³² See also David A. Snow and Philip W. Davis, "The Study of Collective Behavior: An Elaboration and Critical Assessment," in *Self, Collective Behavior and Society: Essays Honoring the Contributions of Ralph H. Turner*, edited by G. M. Platt and C. Gordon (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1994), 97–115.



Figure 5.1 Fatima's tent (closed) in one of the *majālis* in Kuwait with Fatima's hand on the top (2015)

generated collectively around shared symbols and images, all leading to a collective narrative of Fatima's apparition.

5.4 Materializations of Fatima

Additional objects and imageries associated with Fatima and her apparition are also found in what is known as Fatima's hand or Fatima's tent (Figures 5.1 and 5.2). The tent is a very popular object in the countries I visited in the Gulf, as often women use it during their *majālis* with the hope of receiving Fatima's intercessory grace (*baraka*).³³

How the tent as a religious and sacred object is used in the *majālis* varies. Some women hold onto its edges, spread it open, and, while some

³³ Similar research findings within the Hyderabad context, see also Ruffle, "May Fatimah Gather Our Tears," 387.



Figure 5.2 Fatima's open tent in one of the *majālis* in London with Fatima's hand on the top (2014)

keep holding the edges, making knots, others sit underneath it reading prayers. In some *majālis*, women leave the tent closed but those holding it move around the room while hitting the wooden pillar on the ground, allowing women in the *majlis* to make knots and others to open them again; in other *majālis* the tent is not used as part of an active collective ritual practice but rather occupies a specific space in the *majlis* for individuals to perform their own practices as they feel fit. Regarding the meaning and function of the different practices around the use of the tent, one of the participants in the *majlis* in Kuwait explains: “We go underneath the tent as it reminds us of the tents the members of *ahl al-bayt* were in during the battle of Karbala. Sayyida Fatima's *baraka* is in this tent. Whoever goes underneath it will be protected by our beloved Sayyida Fatima.” A participant in Bahrain explains the meaning of knotting the fabric of the tent: it is believed that a person's problems

and the associated pain and sorrow fade away when the next person opens the knot – “*tfuk el-‘azmeh* (relieves pain and conflicts).”

The process of symbolization is central in understanding the roles objects play within religious ritual practices and spaces. Objects very often require a shared meaning to be given to them – meaning that changes over time and place. The collective acceptance of meanings and functions of certain religious objects are important for the communal legitimization of the use of such objects.³⁴ Objects are therefore constructed through collective legitimization of meaning and actions.³⁵ This was particularly noticeable in one of the houses I visited in London. The host of the *majlis* was very proud to show Fatima’s tent that she had brought with her from her last visit to Kuwait. Whereas it is commonly used in Kuwait, in London some women are reluctant to use it and doubt its religious significance. A heated discussion started on whether this tent should be part of the *majlis* or not. Since the object was lacking communal support of its significance, the general “aura” of the tent – that is usually felt in *majālis* in the Gulf – was missing. As the host explains: “The tent is much appreciated in *majālis* back home. Here people are not used to it so they do not know what to do with it.” I saw the same host the next evening in her house again and she reported as follows:

I left the tent open in the living room overnight. Before going to bed, I checked whether the front door was closed. The room felt different. But I soon realized why: Sayyida Fatima was sitting in my tent. I felt so honored. In my house! Here in London. I started crying. She came to tell me not to be sad about my friends’ reactions towards the tent. She was there for me to give me support. I will support her by organizing another *majlis* next week. Come in ... come in.

She invited me into her tent to receive Fatima’s blessing.

At other *majālis* I attended, women also tend to go and sit in the space where Fatima is believed to have appeared and touch what she would have touched with the hope of obtaining her blessing. They sit there for a while praying or talking about what they have felt during Fatima’s visit. That particular space will be remembered and referred to on other occasions. One of the women sitting at the site of Fatima’s apparition explains to me: “You put your hand here like that [sweeping my hand on

³⁴ Snow and Davis, “The Study of Collective Behavior,” 97–115; Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970).

³⁵ David Snow and Phillip. W. Davis, “The Chicago Approach to Collective Behavior,” in *A Second Chicago School? The Development of Postwar American Sociology*, edited by G. A. Fine (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1995), 188–220; David Snow, “Extending and Broadening Blumer’s Conceptualization of Symbolic Interactionism,” *Symbolic Interaction* 24, no. 3 (2001), 367–377. See also Davis and Boles, “Pilgrim Apparition Work,” 371–402.

the floor] then you put it on your chest [sweeping my hand again on my chest]. You can feel your body shivering as Fatima's soul is coming into yours. Try it ... it's a unique feeling." In the course of social interaction after a spiritual appearance, discussions are generated around the authenticity of particular Shi'i practices and communal ways of mourning, including specific devotional poetry recited and language used during lectures. These discussions are also conducted on social media platforms. Pictures of the space might be taken and posted on various social media outlets to be discussed with women who were there or with women who have missed the occasion. Many of the women I met in Bahrain had heard through these social media channels about that particular *majlis* in Kuwait where Fatima appears frequently. Shirazis use their digital landscape to expand to transnational spaces, allowing more women to visit and explore Shirazi women's commemoration methods. Through their increasing popularity across national borders, Shirazis emphasize their narrative of authenticity of belief and uniqueness among Shirazi followers to confirm the legitimacy of their practices.

5.5 Fatima's Apparition as a Medium for Change

As has been discussed, recalling Shi'i history in general and remembering the events at Karbala in particular, as illustrated in the various Shi'i ritual practices discussed so far, not only serve a religious purpose but also give meaning to current political and social contexts and issues. The individual's construction of contemporary Shi'i religious meaning is supported by a collective confirmation expressed through the reconstruction of a shared Shi'i past. The suffering of *ahl al-bayt* under the Banu Umayya, as described in Shi'i narratives and recalled by the women in this study, represents for Shi'is the apogee of suffering and injustice. Drawing analogies between past and present religious and political contexts provides the women with a distinct Shi'i identity and confirms the Shi'i perception of Islamic history as one of continuous suffering.

Fatima is very often remembered through recalling the incident of the attack on her house. Umar ibn al-Khattab, a companion of the Prophet and later second caliph, stormed Fatima's house to secure Ali's pledge of allegiance to Abu Bakr as the first caliph after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. It is believed that Fatima was standing behind the door when Umar pushed it open in order to enter. As this particular narrative continues, this led her ribcage to break, caused the miscarriage of her unborn child, and eventually led to her death. As the following poem heard in London illustrates:

Oh father, I wish you were here
 Oh father, I wish you were here and saw what they have done to your
 daughter
 Oh father, I wish you were here
 How many ribs were broken³⁶
 How many memories were left in the orphans' eyes?

This narrative is highly controversial not only between Sunnis and Shi'is but also within Shi'i communities. Some women in the *majālis* I attended in Dublin reject the narrative with the argument that Fatima is the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad who had a certain social and religious standing within the community and therefore could not have been treated in such a humiliating manner. Others, however, argue that Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, together with his family was humiliated, maltreated, tortured, and eventually killed in Karbala. Hence, in their opinion, Fatima being treated in such a way is not so unlikely and is in line with the patterns of persecution *ahl al-bayt* had to endure more generally.

Fatima's involvement in this particular incident is represented in two ways. On the one hand, she embodies the image of the victim who sacrificed herself for the protection of her family. However, her sacrifice highlights her weakness as a woman being targeted by the male enemy – an enemy who without hesitation and remorse exercised violence on her to gain power and control over the nascent Muslim community. In the various poems recited during ritual practices, the image of Fatima as weak and powerless, being overcome by the enemy, is strengthened by the *mullāya*'s intensive and very detailed description of the attack leading to her injury and subsequent miscarriage. The emotions in the room during a ritual where this image of Fatima is represented are overwhelming as they combine both empathy for Fatima, the victim, as well as anger directed toward Umar. Extensive weeping and self-hitting express the women's sympathy for Fatima's fate while numerous curses leveled against Umar and the Banu Umayya as well as any other perceived opponent of *ahl al-bayt* illustrate the emotional agitation evoked by remembering this incident.

At the same time, the incident is also framed as demonstrating Fatima's strength in dealing with a situation of conflict. Here, Fatima is not presented as a weak and powerless victim, but rather as a strong and independent woman fighting for the safety of her family. It is Fatima and not her husband Ali who is in the center of conflict. As one of the *mullāyāt* in Kuwait explains: "It is Fatima who protected her family from the enemy by

³⁶ *Min Fātima wa-Haydar* (Basim Karbalaei).

not thinking of herself, but rather thinking of the wellbeing of the Shi'i community." Women supporting this representation of the incident highlight the need for women today to think outside of the traditional representation of Fatima as a victim. In this context, a recurring narrative of the female body emerges. Women are urged to think beyond the material world they are living in. The female body is represented as vanishing and not eternal. Here, Fatima's body is taken as an example, highlighting in this incident how her ribs were broken and her child stillborn. However, as the *mullāya* emphasized, one's deeds are eternal: "It is because of Fatima's courage that we are remembering her today. It is what she did and cared for that we celebrate today. We should take that as an example." Women are urged to transcend the limitations of and attachment to their female bodies, to forget emotions, to be strong and to remember what is worth living for. As one *mullāya* in Bahrain highlights:

It is not important whether you are a man or a woman, Bahraini, Kuwaiti, Iranian, or Iraqi. What is important is that you fight for yourself as a Shi'i and hope to die the same death as Fatima because this is what counts ... this is what you will be remembered for.

This proactive stand is then linked and related to recent political events and to women's positionality in such conflicts. Different to D'Souza's research that places Fatima only as a "holy figure whom believers love and revere,"³⁷ in the *majālis* I visited she is referred to as a sociopolitical role model that women seek to emulate. The narrative of the attack on her house is particularly popular in this regard. Fatima experienced maltreatment and the sacrifices she made in order to protect her family is linked to women's own biographies, as this Iraqi woman in London explains: "Explosions were everywhere. My family and I hid underneath the beds. Some soldiers forced themselves into our house. At this moment, I remembered Sayyida Fatima. She gave us protection, and gave me strength and courage."

The link between Fatima and political conflicts and resistance was central in many *majālis* I attended. *Mullāyāt* in the United Kingdom, and even more so in the Gulf region, encourage women to participate in social actions, particularly as family structures and demographics have changed due to sectarian conflicts, civil wars, and the displacement of Shi'is in the region. An increasing number of male family members have been killed, imprisoned, have permanent disabilities due to torture, or have disappeared. This has led to the displacement of many female Shi'is who are now responsible for taking care of their children and other family

³⁷ D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab*, 30.

members.³⁸ A *mullāya* in Bahrain highlights the change in gender roles due to the lack of male protection caused by the government's attack on male members of their families: "Look around you Yafa ... Most of these women are now the 'man' in the house. They need to take care of their families because their husbands or fathers or brothers are not there anymore to take care of them." *Mullāyāt* play a role in changing the mindset of women within the *majālis*, highlighting that within their families they now hold equal responsibility to that of men. The increasing attacks and violence on Shi'is since the Arab uprisings influence women to rethink and redefine family structures and gender roles within their societies. Referring to examples from Shi'i history provides these *mullāyāt* the theological grounding to support their claim for more female engagement in political, social, and religious issues. Taking authoritative historical female Shi'i figures as role models and constructing a narrative that portrays these figures in similar political situations of religious conflict provides women with a confirmation of their right to fight against oppressive regimes and resist any injustice imposed on them. The *mullāyāt* I interviewed highlight the social responsibility that women hold equally to men to fight for their rights.

Women have been encouraged and told repeatedly within *majālis* not to victimize themselves and rather to assume responsibility for their families by becoming independent and strong women. The continuous references to Fatima in the *majālis* I attended highlight the *mullāyāt*'s concern over potential female social passivity: "We should not hide behind curtains. Women are nowadays attacked as much as men and therefore we need to be equipped to fight back and protect ourselves and our children." The empowerment of women, whether in the Middle East or in Europe, is central in the *majālis* I attended. Women are urged to think about the wellbeing of their communities whether through supporting people in need within their neighborhoods or through transnational organizations that through their charitable and humanitarian activities empower women in their communities by providing a safe learning environment for them. One woman in London explains: "We collect money, arrange teachers, design courses, and provide everything women need to learn a skill to start to support their families. Women need to become independent. Financially independent." Some of these women concentrate on changing women's attitudes toward their involvement in society in their neighborhoods first, then take their successes as an example to demonstrate how women can become active members of

³⁸ Shanneik, "Gendering Religious Authority in the Diaspora," 58–67.

their communities transnationally. Within the Gulf region, women are highly vocal regarding the importance of women's financial independence not only from their male family members but also from any government support, as one woman in Bahrain explains: "We Shi'is cannot wait until the government gives us support because they won't. We women cannot wait until our men give us support because they were killed or imprisoned. We therefore need to take care of ourselves. We need to be active and move – like Sayyida Fatima."

These recurring narratives across *majālis* I attended reflect Ali Shariati's plea made in Tehran in the 1970s for changing the way Fatima as a role model should be remembered. Traditionally Fatima "would sit and cry. ... She would cry and lament for hours. She spent her short life crying and cursing her fate until she died."³⁹ He continues by emphasizing the new image of Fatima as being the source of the inspiration for freedom, desiring what is right, the seeker of justice, a woman who resisted oppression, cruelty, and discrimination.⁴⁰ In this type of narrative, Fatima is portrayed as a strong woman overcoming life challenges of poverty and hardships reflected in her epithet of *umm al-maṣā'ib* ("the mother who overcomes catastrophes"⁴¹). Ali Shariati argues that Fatima is "the perfect model of a responsible, fighting woman when confronting her time and the fate of her society."⁴²

Fatima's portrayal as the vanguard of a political revolution and social change is articulated in the role she took in the narrative of Khaybar, where she stood up against injustice. The Prophet is believed to have bequeathed to Fatima the date-palm orchard of Fadak, which she claimed as her inheritance after his death.⁴³ As this particular narrative continues, Abu Bakr, who became the ruling caliph, rejected Fatima's claim on the grounds that prophets do not give any inheritance, but their property should be given away for charity (*sadaqa*) after their death.⁴⁴ By

³⁹ Shariati, *Fatima Is Fatima*, 13. See also Marcia K. Hermansen, "Fatimah as a Role Model in the Works of Ali Shari'ati," in *Women and Revolution in Iran*, edited by Guity Nashat (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1983).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁴¹ As was explained to me. However, the way one translates this reflects one's attitude toward Fatima.

⁴² Shariati, *Fatima is Fatima*, 27. See also Ruffle, "May Fatimah Gather Our Tears."

⁴³ See Fahmida Suleman, "The Hand of Fatima: In Search of Its Origins and Significance," in *People of the Prophet's House*, edited by Fahmida Suleman (London: Islamic Publications, 2015), 173–188 (180); Laura Veccia Vaglieri, "Fatima," in *Encyclopedia of Islam 3: C–G*, new edition, edited by B. Lewis, C. Pellat, and J. Schacht (Leiden: Brill 1991), 841–850 (844); Soufi, "The Image of Fatima in Classical Muslim Thought," 69–74.

⁴⁴ References were made to the following Quranic verse: "From what is left by parents and those nearest related, there is a share for men, and a share for women." See Qur'an,

taking this particular example, women present Fatima as courageously speaking up against this injustice, challenging authorities, in this case Abu Bakr, and fighting for her rightful property that the illegitimate ruler withheld from her.

Shi'is in the diaspora are encouraged by their *mullāyāt* to follow the example of Fatima and think about their own land they were forced to leave behind – land they believe to have been taken by latter-day embodiments of the Banu Umayya: Saddam Hussein during his reign, the so-called Islamic State or any other current Sunni monarchy in the Gulf region, such as the Al Khalifa in Bahrain. The narrative of resistance and the fight for one's rights is constantly referred to during *majālis*, highlighting thereby the roles women in particular should play in the fight against injustice. As one of my interviewees in London explains:

We need to know that we as women should fight for what belongs to us. Similar to the fight Sayyida Fatima led either for her husband's right to lead the Muslim community after the Prophet's death or for her fight for the land they took from her. Women are as strong as anyone else. Our Shi'i history proves it.

In one of the private *majālis* I attended in Bahrain, the *mullāya* recalled a story she heard from her mother who due to her husband's illness had to work in the field to feed their children at home. The *mullāya* moved from this narrative to the present-day, asking women to look around them: "Look here and there [commanding women to move their head to the right and to the left] and make yourself useful." While women were moving their heads from side to side, one woman pointed toward the door saying *as-salāmu 'alayki yā sayyidat nisā' al-'ālamīn* ("peace be upon you, oh Mistress of all the women of the universe"), indicating thereby Fatima's appearance. At this point, the room was filled with excited and ecstatic women looking toward the door sending their greetings to Fatima and all of the members of *ahl al-bayt* and saying prayers collectively as well as individually. The situation required one woman to link the crowd's attention to a figure in the room whom they believed to be Sayyida Fatima. This generated a chain of confirmations expressed through women's greetings to Fatima. The *mullāya* used the moment to emphasize her message of gender mobilization and social activism within the local context:

Sūrat al-Nisā' [Chapter of the Women], 4:7. Ruffle explains in her own research on the figure of Fatima: "Fatimah invoked her Qur'ānic legal right and brought her case to court for arbitration. Although she was ultimately unsuccessful, her knowledge of her legal rights and desire for justice indicates that she was deeply involved in the affairs of society." See, Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism*, 75–76. See also Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub, *The Crisis of Muslim History* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005), 21.

Our beloved Fatima is supporting you girls. Your community needs you. Your families need you. Your husband and your sons need you. Take Sayyida Fatima as your example. She was the right hand of her father supporting the Prophet Muhammad in everything in life. With the miraculous presence of our beloved Sayyida Fatima I urge you all to move and act and help.

As discussed, Fatima is remembered as the one who fought for her right to inherit, placing herself in danger in order to protect her family. This narrative supports the *mullāya* in encouraging their female believers to find their own roles in society and feeds into a liberal and progressive feminist agenda. Women in crisis situations take Fatima in particular as the ultimate example since she represents the ideal woman whom female Shi'is believers imitate. Fatima is the embodiment of an alternative patriarchal order predominant in Arab societies. The increasing change regarding the redefinition of gender roles and reconstruction of family structures occurring in various Arab countries, including in the Gulf, and particularly since the Arab uprisings, is a focal point of discussion in *majālis* I attended. Fatima is equally venerated by men and women and represents in her female identity as daughter, wife, and mother the ideal image of womanhood who, in addition to her social roles, was very knowledgeable in Islamic teachings and, as illustrated earlier, is believed to have fought for justice. At *majālis* I attended in Kuwait, Fatima's virtues of being a good daughter to her father, a supportive wife to her husband, and a caring mother to her children is central:

She is the mother of her father⁴⁵
 She is the mother of the universe⁴⁶
 Who will ease her of her loss?
 Who will comfort her of her sorrow?
 Your place in the tents was empty
 No one would be more affectionate than you
 If you were in the plains of Karbala and saw your child
 You would have shown endurance and patience
 But who would comfort your pain?

The description of this particular incident is very emotional and focuses on the relationship between a mother and her child. The death of Imam Husayn's baby child Ali al-Asghar and his mother's cry at her loss is often related to Fatima and her loss of her sons. In order to connect the women in the *majlis* emotionally even more closely to these incidents, a link is made between Shi'i historical female figures and women's own loss of their children and their pain – a feeling many women in the *majlis* who are

⁴⁵ *Umm abihā.* ⁴⁶ Fatima's wider cosmological role is again emphasized here.

mothers themselves and who very often have lost their own children – in war or during riots leading to their children’s death or imprisonment – can relate to. The high status of mothers is repeatedly highlighted within the *majālis*, with one *mullāya* in Kuwait saying:

With each heartbeat, remember your mother.
 Your mother is your soul.
 I don’t need to tell you the importance of mothers.
 If you have a mother take good care of her.
 If you have lost her, pray for her.

Similar to other sociopolitical gatherings,⁴⁷ *majālis* are used as a space to articulate sociopolitical issues. These issues are linked to mythico-historical Shi’i narratives constructed in various *majālis* around the maltreatment and killing of Shi’is in general. Fatima is part of this mythical paradigm of Shi’i-ness that is used in the *majālis* to legitimize their claim for more rights not only in terms of religious but also political and social participation. Urging women, whether in the Middle East or in Europe, to demonstrate on the streets and to call for justice for the maltreatment and killing of Shi’is in Bahrain or Saudi Arabia has been repeatedly mentioned as part of the *mullāyāt*’s lectures during *majālis*.⁴⁸ Demands for women’s central role in promoting social and political change has been part of *majālis*, making reference to women’s active role in influencing the political scene through their participation in demonstrations, their involvement in charity and humanitarian organizations, and their role in changing the mindset on gender roles within a new generation of Shi’i women. Through these references, *mullāyāt* promote a version of the “new Shi’i woman” who is, like Fatima, a mother, a wife, a sociopolitical activist, and a revolutionary by changing gender role dynamics. The “new Shi’i woman” is not the one who mourns her loss and pain per se but is also active in a powerful collective aiming for the betterment of society and the Shi’i community worldwide.

5.6 Conclusion

Religious actors construct meaning of religious events, symbols, and objects expressed through ritual practices in the course of social

⁴⁷ See Tripp, *The Power and the People*.

⁴⁸ Shi’i women are very vocal on London streets in demonstrating against the maltreatment of Shi’is in the Gulf. Weekly demonstrations were organized in front of the Saudi embassy in 2015 in order to prevent the execution of Shaykh Nimr, as well as to raise public awareness of the human rights violations against Shi’is in the country. For more, see Shanneik, “Moving into Shia Islam.”

interaction producing and renewing socialities. Similar to the ritual practices elaborated upon in the previous chapters, the figure of Fatima is another activity constructing a social world in a sensorially rich manner affecting Shi'i women's understanding of their Shi'i-ness embedded within turbulent geopolitical developments in the Middle East.⁴⁹ Apparitions are another level of symbolization and social interaction with the aim of constructing a distinct religious identity articulated through ritual practices and women's interaction with the sacred figure of Fatima. Apparitions become another sensory experience in which the individual searches for meaning and interpretation of the visual within a collective. Women actively negotiate the presence of the figure of Fatima and construct meaning for signs and symbols important for their individual and collective understanding of themselves as Shi'is.⁵⁰

The unique opportunity for the Shi'i community to be visited by Fatima is used by *mullāyāt* to link them to the Shi'i communities' narrative of exceptionalism at large. This link is very important for Shi'i women's confirmation of their identity on three levels: (1) The Shi'i community in general is positioned in an extraordinary situation – marginalized, oppressed, and persecuted by non-Shi'i groups as well as by oppressive political regimes in the Gulf region; (2) the Shirazis, as a targeted Shi'i group within the larger Shi'i community, are placed in a distinctive position because Fatima favors them in particular with her apparitions; (3) women within Shirazi communities are distinguished from other Shi'i women groups as Fatima appears frequently within their women-only *majālis*.

Shi'i women exercise a form of female agency that is not built on liberal notions of progressive femininities but rather on their ability to acquire a degree of a religious self that enables them to see the sacred figure of Fatima.⁵¹ Shirazi women believe Fatima visits their *majālis* most frequently and are seen by Shirazis more than by any other Shi'i group. Such a notion of aesthetic performative collectivity distinguishes them from other Shi'i groups. It also places them on a higher spiritual level, allowing Shirazi women to feel empowered. Fatima's appearances help individuals to build an alternative community to counter anti-Shirazi sentiments prevalent within as well as outside of Shi'i circles. Shirazi women redefine existing power dynamics through carving for themselves a distinct Shi'i identity. This is important for Shirazi Shi'i women's processes of subjectification as it involves self-cultivation to the extent

⁴⁹ Chau, "The Sensorial Production of the Social," 485–504.

⁵⁰ Davis and Boles, "Pilgrim Apparition Work," 395.

⁵¹ Compare here Mahmood's discussion on religious piety. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

of being able to disrupt the structural stability of social norms, achieved through making the invisible figure of Fatima visible not only to Shirazis or other Shi'is but also to Sunnis.⁵² A female agency is thereby produced through a shared aesthetic style in the form of the imagined figure of Fatima. Similar to the Virgin Mary, Fatima symbolizes an immaculate and pure status. Through Fatima's apparition, this extraordinary and sublime status is transferred further to the Shirazis and to Shirazi women in particular, who understand her apparitions as legitimizing the authenticity of their distinct Shi'i-ness.

⁵² For more on Fatima's apparition, see Shanneik, "Making Fatima's Presence Visible: Embodied Practices, Shi'i Aesthetics and Socio-Religious Transformations in Iran," unpublished manuscript.