

Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research
Vol. 6, No. 3 (Winter 2020)

Gendered Migration Waves and Queering Time: Kurdish migrant men in Belgium

Rojda Yavuz

Gendered Encounter with the State

The Kurdish migrant men relevant to this essay must be viewed within the historical specificity of the forced migration waves to Louvain, Belgium, of the 1990s and early 2000s. While a claim to a universal Kurdish experience can be relinquished, the impetus behind the migration was political crackdown and state violence in cities outlining Kurdistan, known as Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq respectively. The war on Kurds and Kurdish identity, enacted through physical, psychological, and infrastructural violence, advanced through village burning, mass incarceration, systemic torture, as well as the violent efforts made to erase Kurdish cultural and linguistic practises. These were all acts of brutality of which the diasporic community relevant to this essay was not exempt. While on the one hand, Kurdistan signifies the homeland that was left behind with migration, it also stands as a place that does not exist within the logic of borders and modern nation-states. The historic contextualisation of this community is significant as these lived experiences in the homeland, which holds a dual meaning in the Kurdish context, produce meanings and meaning-making practises in the diasporic space in the new host-state, for both those that migrated and the subsequent generations that were born in Belgium, to which I ultimately belong.

The creation of subjectivities should not be considered axiomatic or pre-given. In regards to this, Althusser's notion of "interpellation" is still of value (1971). As Althusser so carefully explicates, subject formation takes place within the invisible realm of ideology and is cultivated by institutions surrounding the subject. The relationship of individuals to their real conditions is mystified through ideology as they are transformed or "hailed" into subjects socially, culturally, symbolically, and psychically, all at once (Brah 2012 p.10). As such, the body is inscribed with meaning and becomes discursively and materially fashioned by the complex interlocking relationships of power, personality, and differing subject positions, i.e. race, class, gender, and citizenship status (Walker and Roberts 2018 p.247).

The physical crossing of borders transforms the Kurdish man into a "migrant" and shapes a racialised subjectivity that stands at the margin of Belgian society. Tudor (2018) reminds us that not all border-crossings construct a migrant. Rather, the category of migrant functions as a hierarchical ascription that relies on nationality, country of origin, and, often times, class. In the construction of Europe as white, the Kurdish man appears as the racialised Other and, subsequently, as never at home in Europe (Tudor 2018). His localisation in a physical no-person's-land, where he neither belongs to the hegemonic space nor the homeland, turns him into the perpetual migrant, and materialises a different mode of being "male." Foucault (1978) concurs that truths around sexuality and gender do not appear in a vacuum, but instead, are a configuration of socio-economic and political dynamics of a space and time nexus. Political climates render particular bodies visible and materialise hegemonic and non-hegemonic models of being male. Similarly, new gendered identities can be produced continuously and find justification through the state project. The subjectivation of the Kurdish man as migrant is essential to the state, as migrants carry economic values tied to racism, i.e. jobs, citizenship, and visa. His subject position as a migrant man in Belgium imagines expectations around his existence and every-day activities, whereby labour is prioritised. While a neoliberal labour regime regulates and automatises the bodies of men as a whole, the life of the migrant is determined almost entirely by the task of securing and keeping work, and ideally legal work (Boehringer 2017 p.184). Labour turns into meaning and determines his capitalist citizenship in a broader context, as well as his futurity and citizenship in the host state. Without work, the migrant can be deported at any moment. The search for work, and maintaining it, determines his being and constitutes his thinking (Ibid.). While gender identities are cultivated and upheld by institutions, Hasso

(2018) reminds us that they are achieved by individuals alike. The centrality of labour in Kurdish masculinity is echoed within the Kurdish diasporic community. The working male symbolises the caretaker and protector of the family, through which the stay of the family in the host state is guaranteed, for which he, in return, gains respectability.

The production of gender identities in the Kurdish diasporic community in Louvain must be discussed within its own logic of space, time, and identity. Brah coins “diaspora space” as the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes (Brah 1996 p.205). Diaspora presupposes borders and inversely, borders presuppose diasporising processes; the logic of borders is immanent to diaspora space. Accordingly, this accomplishes the realisation of a country of destination and a country of origin, which converts the question of home and belonging into a political one (Brah 1996; Mohanty 2003). Brah contends that home is not a fixed word but a moving signifier that is constructed and transformed in and through social practices, cultural imaginaries, historical memories, and deep intimacies; home not only denotes where the subject is from but also what they are moving towards. As a migrant community fighting for self-determination, the Kurdish community derives ideas around identity from the imagined home-land. The connection to a home other than where one is situated, and thereby the promise or possibility of a return, lies at the heart of Kurdish diasporic consciousness (Weiss 2016 p.60). A historic, current, or imaginary emotional allegiance to the “homeland” materialises meanings and gender identities from the collective memory and re-memory of the diasporic community.

The political persecution and state violence that Kurdish migrant men faced, in nations respectively known as Kurdistan, articulate a masculinity that imagines Kurdish men to be heroes. Within this aspect, my positionality as a Kurd from the subsequent generations, as born and raised outside of Kurdistan in this diasporic community, becomes of value. In a personal interview, I described how through storytelling during my childhood, the involvement of my father and uncles in the underground resistance movement for a liberated Kurdistan in Turkey in the early 1980s not only establishes them in the minds of the second generation as men who cannot be weakened, but also shaped the ways I view my own Kurdish identity (Berbatovci 2018). Kurdistan becomes a subtext of the diasporic space and imagination through the performance of memories. In her account on postcolonial masculinities, Kabesh (2009) reflects on the materiality of masculinity through the memory of her father. Contrary to a hegemonic capitalist timeframe in which the future is prioritised, she argues that postcolonial masculinities are a configuration of past, present, and future. Substantiating Kabesh’s argument, the depiction of the Kurdish man as a hero surviving the violence at the hands of the Iraqi or Turkish state lives on through his present and future versions within this diasporic space. Narratives are lived and do not leave the body when the Kurdish man moves spaces; the male body is transformed into an archive from which meaning is derived (Kabesh 2009 p.342). The origin stories carried by Kurdish men are valued and transformed into meaning in the Kurdish diasporic community in Louvain, and construct a wave of heroic and respectable masculinity in which Kurdish men fought for the liberation of their land that lies in the future.

Queering the Timeline

In March 2019, a Kurdish man in Louvain took his own life. It was the first suicide since the formation of the Kurdish diasporic community in the 1990’s. As the original reasons behind the suicide remain concealed, I will scrutinise the discursive value the act carries for Kurdish masculinity as a construct through the following

question: Can the suicide be read as a queer act that generates a fracture with gender roles? I follow Amit's (2018) definition of "queer" as a signifier holding the potential to undermine national and social conventions (p.122). I do not aim to posit a definite answer or conclusion in this essay. If anything, further research into Kurdish masculinities is required.

Choosing to commit suicide presses the question of futurity and requires a wider analysis of temporality in the conceptualisation of Kurdish masculinity. Through his subject positionality as migrant and racialised Other, the Kurdish man is excluded from the hegemonic temporality and spatiality as he does not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship. His marginalised position in Belgian society is mystified by the neoliberal valorisation of "a better tomorrow" that can seemingly only be achieved through labour. The hegemonic logic of temporality prioritises the future and imagines a progress of a continuous nature, in which the promise of normative citizenship for the migrant man is assumed. As such, the subject is perpetually gazing into the future with the aim to move towards it. Similarly, the diasporic Kurdish imagination places the Kurdish man's past and present continuously in relation to a liberated Kurdistan of the future. While his past and present are valued within diasporic discourse, contrary to the hegemonic logic of temporality, the future once again becomes the point of reference.

By committing suicide, the Kurdish man exits the national and diasporic temporality and spatiality. The act expresses pessimism towards the future and articulates a desire for different times and different spaces. Amit (2018) posits that regression from linear normative time is what allows a unique potential, an arena that enables the creation of new hopes and expectations of the future, or even new and different ways of thinking and enabling expectation or longing (p.125). While the suicide exits time as a whole and the articulation of new hopes is denied, it generates a fracture with a masculinity naturalised through futurity. The act can be seen as subverting the gender role as it provides a rift within the hegemonic and Kurdish imagination. In this way, the suicide can be described as a non-normative act or a "queer" act. It dismantles the direct connection between the Kurdish man, and the neoliberal labour regime and the liberation of Kurdistan that both rely on the labour and existence of male bodies to perpetuate their meanings. As the suicide marks a definitive departure from normative time and space, the signifiers of Kurdish masculinity, namely labour, heteronormativity, family, and a liberated Kurdistan, will no longer be embodied and as such, the promise of futurity expires; the masculinity is left behind with the act. The construction of a masculinity that views the body as a commodity, where it ages and wears out fast, or a weapon for Kurdish freedom, can translate into a fracture between the mind and the body, where the Kurdish man can experience a loss of the materiality of the body. With the act of suicide, the body is employed as a tool to speak back. It is through physicality that the Kurdish man acts upon and negotiates with these discursive embodiments; the physical body dismantles the discursive body.

It is important to remain wary of romanticising the suicide, as the tragic act ultimately highlights the difficulty of negotiating with gender constructions. While the permanent and physical regression from linear normative time through suicide undoes the naturalised gendered meanings cast through the Kurdish man, it equally denies new possibilities or ways of being male. This prompts inquiry into the existence of other forms of speaking back or gendered disobediences. Navigating around these gender roles becomes complex as Kurdish men are entangled in different temporalities and spaces that impinge on their agency. The capitalist logic of the Belgian state offers no space to negotiate with the conditions of labour and citizenship through which this masculinity is formulated, as these ultimately guarantee survival and safety. Moreover, their

politicised existence in a wider geopolitical framework further complicates the possibility of negotiating: as the quest for a liberated Kurdistan is ongoing, and the desire of return is still cherished, what is perceived as heroic masculinity will continue to be perpetuated as part of a nationalist project.

References

- Althusser, L. 1971. Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses. In: *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. London: Monthly Review Press, 1971, pp 84-126.
- Amit, H. 2018. *A queer way out: the politics of queer emigration from Israel*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Berbatovci, F. 2018. My Kurdish me, is all of me: holding on to identity. *Artefact Magazine* [online]. 31 January. My Kurdish me, is all of me: Holding on to Identity - Artefact (artefactmagazine.com) [Accessed 26 August 2020]
- Boehringer, M. 2017. Cultures of Memory, Migration, and Masculinity: Dimitré Dinev's Engelszungen. In: Mitterbauer, H, Smith-Prei, C. *Crossing Central Europe*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017, pp 169-195.
- Brah, A. 1996. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge.
- Brah, A. 2012. The scent of memory: strangers, our own and others. *Feminist Review*. 100, pp 6-26.
- Foucault, M. 1978. *History of Sexuality: 1*. London: Penguin Group.
- Hasso, F. 2018. Decolonizing Middle East men and masculinities scholarship: an axiomatic approach. *Arab Studies Journal* [online]. 15 October. <https://tinyurl.com/y8jeumxw>. [Accessed 24 April 2020]
- Mohanty, CT. 2003. *Feminism without borders: decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Durham; London: Duke University Press.
- Kabesh, TA. 2009. Injurious imperialism: Reflecting on my father. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*. 45(3), pp 341-350.
- Tudor, A. 2018. Cross-fadings of racialisation and migratisation: the postcolonial turn in Western European gender and migration studies. *Gender, Place & Culture*. 25(7), pp 1057-1072.
- Weiss, G. 2016. Diasporic looking: portraiture, diaspora and subjectivity. In: Hinkson, M. *Imaging Identity*. Australia: ANU Press, 2016, pp 59-82.
- Walker, C, Roberts, S. 2018. *Masculinity, labour and neoliberalism*. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yd26b3o2>. [Downloaded: 28 August 2019]