Irreligiosity and Belonging

Reflections on an Iranian Dutch Dance Performance

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From 11 to 13 October 2017, the international research conference Religious Minorities’ Claims of Difference and Sameness in the Politics of Belonging was hosted by the Department of Sociology and Religious Studies at Utrecht University. The aim of this conference was to explore how perceptions of specific religious minorities feed into the ways in which these minorities and/or their religion. In a series of blog posts, different conference participants write about this blog about an Iranian Dutch dance performance, Dr. Rahil Roodsaz explores the correlation between ‘whiteness’ and ‘irreligiosity’ in the Netherlands.
Irreligiosity and Belonging: Reflections on an Iranian Dutch Dance Performance

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In July 2011, the famous Iranian–American pop–singer, Faramarz Asef, was invited to the city of Nijmegen for an annual summer festivity. Before the concert started, he organized a gathering and celebration that, of course, we would rather have in Iran. Maybe someday, after we have gotten rid of this religious dictatorship, we will exactly that.” Capturing exilic sentiments among especially the first generation Dutch immigrants, his statements were received by cheers and applause from the previous years, a crowd of approximately 500 people of Iranian descent from cities attended the event. During this two hours’ festive program, men and women of all categories would dance, sing and drink together. Dolled up women, wearing sleek dresses and high heels joined men with well-tailored suits or shirts tightly fitting their body and fashionable hairstyles. Combined with the loud westernized pop music produced in Los Angeles, this performance would catch the attention of many bystanders. As an observer, which I was doing as part of my PhD research, I had to answer bystanders’ questions about this group’s background. To quote a curious middle-aged tourist: “Where do these people come from? Iran? Really? I thought they might be Italians...”

’Where do you come from?’ appears to be a typical question for non–white people (2001). According to Sara Ahmed (2017, 117), such questions often work as ‘asser questions are stopped, a right to stop you is asserted. In being assertive, such speech acts questionable, as someone who can be questioned, as someone who should be questioned. A body can become a question mark.” In case of the Iranian Dutch dance performance, the bystander stops to pose this question, which suggests curiosity and a sense of place associated with what he observes. Although the Iranian Dutch dance surrounded by other ‘ethnic’ performances, as put by the organizer, such as Arabic belly dancing and different kinds of ‘exotic’ food trucks, the Iranian west and the entire dance performance, rather than ‘ethnic’ or ‘exotic’, conveyed a cultural identity.
whiteness as also hinted at by the bystander’s association of what he saw with the very question of whether they are Italian as posed by the bystander shows the question of whether they are Italian as posed by the bystander shows the quality of either white or non-white. As Sara Ahmed poses in her analysis of the stranger’ (Ahmed 2017, 117), the Iranian Dutch partially white and partially appearance is inconsistent with the expectation of the bystander of what or who dance scene, the Iranian Dutch are neither entirely the ethnic or exotic ‘other’, white ‘us’. Their performance looks too white to be seen as part of the former aspect as ‘Italian’ convey, yet being located in the ‘ethnic’ corner of their not entirely white appearance do not allow for their self-evident categorization.

The Iranian American sociologist Neda Maghbouleh (2017, 170) argues, “In an era of Terror, a racialized master category governs and links Arab, Middle-Eastern, Middle-Eastern, Asian Americans, despite [...] internal diversity.” In the context of Western Europe, a racialized master category seems to operate as suggested by the interchangeability of terms like ‘Muslim’, ‘Middle-Eastern’, ‘immigrant’ and ‘refugee’ in articulating anxieties about ‘integration’ in western societies. Underlying the questionability of the whiteness of the Iranian Dutch appearance during their dance performance is an anxiety between non-white Middle-Eastern bodies and Islam in the Dutch context. In the ‘integration’ discourse, these bodies are connected to each other as part of a larger category associated with ethnic, religious and cultural difference as opposed to a secular category of Dutchness. Nevertheless, in case of the Iranian Dutch, the by of whether they are Italian simultaneously points at the fluidity of and possibilities between the categories of ‘white’ and ‘non-white’.

The approximately 35.000 Iranian Dutch form a minority group with an Islamic majority of whom have come to the Netherlands as political refugees in the past decades. Due to their past and sometimes current political activities against the Iran, their relationship with religion can be described as strained. Some of their leftist background and many associate religion, Islam in particular, with an oppositional alliance with the Iranian authorities and provoke suspicion (Roodsaz 2015). Within the community, being openly religious might be seen as a provocation that would challenge the solidarity and provocation of the Iranian authorities and provoke suspicion (Roodsaz 2015; Ghomi...
Moreover, previous studies have pointed at the relative absence of organized rel (2006) and a marginalized religious identity (Ghorashi 2001) within this group. Participation in the job market, a high level of education and a tendency to live Dutch have been reported among this group as signs of their relatively successful Dutch society (CBS 2016). Furthermore, expressing a critical view on Islam in public Dutch media by some of the well-known Iranian Dutch, such as the law professor, adds to this group’s reputation as secular.

Although these qualifications bring them closer to being included into the white category of Dutchness, in other contexts the Iranian Dutch are confronted with treatments. Particularly, political anxieties around a nuclear Islamic Iran have, informed a ban in 2007 on receiving university education in the fields related to sensitive nuclear technology for Iranians in the Netherlands. This decision was sanctions against Iran, and was met with protests in the Iranian Dutch community shows the lack of steadiness of the Iranian Dutch ‘safe’ position as part of the community and secular Dutchness based on socio-economic achievements and anti-religious beliefs.

Liberal ideas about sexuality and gender are perceived as an important vehicle in modern identity and belonging to Dutch society among the Iranian Dutch, as I informed in my PhD-thesis. One of the most important characteristics of this liberal attitude is religious authority over issues of sexuality and gender. This rejection, for instance, the opportunities in a diasporic context to gain sexual and romantic experience Iranian-Dutch parents imagine their children growing up in the Netherlands to cohabit with a potential partner before committing to a married life, which their own experiences regarding the choice of marriage partner while living in Iran what would be gained by a move from religion and towards modernity are possible masculinities beyond the value of honour and femininities that involve sexual selves. Issues of sexuality and gender, in particular homosexuality, are seen as a matter that are protected and respected in the Netherlands as a secular society, and are they perceive as the problematic treatment of mainly women, gays and lesbians Islamic laws and culture. Embracing a liberal attitude towards sexuality and gender
rhetorical move to position the self outside a religious past and within a secular rejection of religion ‘irreligiosity’, as part of an attempt to claim a modern self sexuality and gender.

Such constructions of belonging need to be seen as embedded within a larger Dutch integration of (Islamic) minority groups in the Netherlands. As scrutinized by various authors (Dudink 2017; Bracke 2012; Mepschen, Duyvendak and Tonkens 2010), within the progressive Dutch nation as opposed to backward immigrant others is imagined often based on notions of gender and sexuality. According to its popular rhetoric, which immigrants manage to appropriate a liberal attitude towards sexuality as an instance with regard to issues of sexual diversity and gender equality, would revolve around ‘integration’ into Dutch society. The Dutch nation is here assumed and reproduced as secular and progressive and sexuality and gender are employed as the means to integration. Within this discursive field, minority groups with an Islamic background, such as Iranian Dutch, engage in constructions of belonging through negotiating, appropriating, and sometimes rejecting expected ethnic and religious identities and positionalities.

Given the framing of the dance event as an illustration of how one would prefer party in an Iran liberated from Islamic dictatorship, as the Iranian American artist and the audience seems to underline, together with the previously outlined popular sentiments among the Iranian Dutch expressed in relation to issues of sexuality, propose to consider their dancing bodies as constitutive of a move from religious to secular. Within the diasporic setting. They reject Islam as one of the expected categories of otherness in accordance with another expected category of difference, namely being ‘exotic’.

The Iranians’ dancing performance can be seen as an effort to embrace irreligiosity which they overstep the white/non-white racial boundary in the Dutch context. Middle-Eastern, Muslim and non-white are seen as interchangeable. However, ‘pass through’ as either entirely white or non-white, given the curious and surly reaction of bystanders about their background in a space where only ‘exotic’ irreligious expected. If being unmarked, normalized and naturalized can be taken as a sign
requirement for certain bodies to explain one’s claim to irreligiosity discloses a inclusion in whiteness. This allows us to see the racial boundaries of the secular flexibility and fragility of those boundaries, allowing identities and bodies to be out of whiteness (Maghbouleh 2017). Nevertheless, this incomplete inclusion is that it serves as the very condition for the Iranian Dutch to act ‘unexpectedly’ a enabling them to craft an identity as a racial insider through irreligiosity, howe incomplete. The Iranian Dutch’ dance performance offers an opportunity to bec visible by not conforming to an expected appearance, a visibility that indicates a between whiteness and non-whiteness and thus carries possibilities of transgre

Further reading


