

Insights into the Feminist Movement in Iraqi Kurdistan: Lessons
from the History of Theatre

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Navigating Censure: Kurdish Women and the Early Theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan

RÉSUMÉ

Les spécialistes du nationalisme kurde et du féminisme ont déjà étudié l'émergence de la « question féminine » au sein du discours nationaliste kurde du début du XXe siècle. Cet article confirme et approfondit ces travaux en examinant l'apparition du théâtre au Kurdistan irakien et le discours qu'il a suscité sur les rôles et les droits des femmes dans la société. En examinant les difficultés rencontrées pour recruter des comédiennes, le jeu d'acteur intergenre et le travestissement qui en ont résulté au théâtre, la représentation des questions féminines dans les premières pièces kurdes, ainsi que les points de vue des défenseurs du théâtre sur la question féminine, cet article illustre le rôle du théâtre dans la promotion de la conscience féministe et la mise en lumière des luttes des femmes kurdes au sein de la société kurde patriarcale du XXe siècle.

Mots-clés : théâtre kurde, jeu d'actrice, Kurdistan irakien, féminisme, nationalisme

ABSTRACT

Scholars of Kurdish nationalism and feminism have previously explored the rise of the “woman question” within early twentieth-century Kurdish nationalist discourse. This paper affirms and extends that scholarship by examining the emergence of theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan and the discourse it generated on women’s roles and rights in society. By exploring challenges in recruiting women actors, the resulting cross-gender acting in theatre, the portrayal of women’s issues in early Kurdish plays, and the perspectives of theatre advocates on the woman question, this paper highlights Kurdish women’s struggle to enter the theatrical stage and how the justification for their inclusion was predominantly articulated through the framework of nationalist ideology.

KEYWORDS: theatre, female acting, Iraqi Kurdistan, feminism, nationalism

Introduction

The notion that “[w]omen among the Kurds enjoy considerably more freedom than among the neighbouring Arabs, Turks or Persians” has been expressed by many nationalist Kurds as well as Western travellers of previous centuries who observed the absence of veiling among the Kurdish women and their free association with men.¹ This was definitely Agatha Christie’s experience when she travelled to Syria with her archaeologist husband in the 1930s. “[N]ot for a moment could you mistake a Kurdish woman for an Arab woman...A Kurdish woman has no doubt that she is as good as a man or better!” Christie wrote in her witty chronicle, *Come, Tell Me How You Live*.² While Arab women were “modest and retiring”, smiled shyly, turned their face away when spoken to, and would never come up and speak to a man, Kurdish women came out of their houses and made jokes to any man, their “unwomanly” behaviour in freely speaking up to their husbands profoundly shocking to Arab men unused to Kurds.³

To illustrate the greater gender equality in Kurdistan, many have cited as evidence strong Kurdish women in tribal ruling families, such as Lady Adela (c.1847-1924), the “uncrowned queen” of Halabja, who played important roles in local politics.⁴ However, the authority that women from landed aristocracy held was due to their families’ social status, and not indicative of the average Kurdish woman’s status in society.⁵ As scholars have previously pointed out, the nature and degree of Kurdish women’s privileges and freedoms depended on their specific environment, as different cultural patterns across Kurdistan allowed varying degrees of freedom.⁶

¹ Kinnane, Derk, *The Kurds and Kurdistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 13; For an analysis of Western accounts of Kurdish women see Galletti, Mirella, “Western Images of the Women’s Role in Kurdish Society,” in *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds*, ed. Mojab, Shahrzad (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2001), 209–226.

² Christie, Agatha, *Come, Tell Me How You Live* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1974), 81.

³ *Ibid.*, 81–2, 145.

⁴ Edmonds, C. J. “The place of the Kurds in the Middle Eastern scene.” *Journal of The Royal Central Asian Society* 45, no. 2 (1958): 150.

⁵ van Bruinessen, Martin. “From Adela Khanum to Leyla Zana: Women as Political Leaders in Kurdish History.” In *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds*, ed. Shahrzad Mojab (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers), 103.

⁶ See Hansen, Henny Harald, *The Kurdish Woman’s Life: Field Research in a Muslim Society, Iraq* (Copenhagen: Nationalmuseet, 1961) and Teyfûr, Jîla F., *Mafî Jin Le Komeli Kurdewarîda: Basêkî Mêjûyî* (Women’s Rights in Kurdish Society: A Historical Perspective) (Kista, Sweden: Kitab-Arzan, 2000).

History shows that Kurdish women in urban milieus, did not fare any better than their Arab counterparts when it came to social participation and public visibility. Women often experienced greater freedom of movement in humble social circles and rural settings, such as in the Syrian village described by Christie, where the women lived “in hovels of mud, with perhaps a few cooking-pots as all their possessions.”⁷ In the urban milieu, on the other hand, restrictions were typically more pronounced than in villages. While Christie’s Kurdish women strolled across the countryside unveiled and in bright-coloured turbans and clothes, like “great gay flowers”, in Iraqi Kurdish towns they were covered in the black of their *abaya*, the common over-garment across the Arab Middle East and North Africa, as well as the face veil (see Figure 1).⁸



Figure 1. Women walking past the Erbil citadel. Source: *Other Ranks of Kut* by P.W. Long, 1938.

In the interwar period, the question of appearing in public without face veils —*niqab* in Arabic or *peçe* in Ottoman Turkish— was a highly contentious issue and part of broader discussion on women’s roles in public life in modern Middle Eastern states. This was symbolised by the Egyptian feminist Huda Sha‘rawi’s defiant gesture to remove her niqab at the Cairo railway station in 1923. Over three decades later, during her field research in Kurdistan in 1957, Hansen observed that it was still “unthinkable” for any woman in a town like Sulaymaniyah or the smaller Halabja, to leave her home without taking with her “its seclusion in the form of the *abā-o-pīčā* as these two articles of clothing were obligatory for every girl from the age of 13-14.”⁹

⁷ Christie, *Come, Tell Me How You Live*, 82.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁹ Hansen, *The Kurdish Woman’s Life*, 167.

In Iraq post WWI, Sulaymaniyah—still hailed as the cultural capital of the region—was the liveliest centre of Kurdish culture and the seat of the first semi-autonomous Kurdish government. In 1926 when the first school for girls opened in Sulaymaniyah, education for girls was still a controversial topic. Girls were often expected to marry at a young age and, as pointed out by Hansen, after a certain age, they were not to appear in public unveiled. As women, they had to focus on domestic life, with their primary aspirations limited to marriage, motherhood and homemaking. Education was not deemed a necessity for girls and government-sponsored public schools for girls were absent in Kurdistan. In a society obsessed with protecting male honour, which is defined by the preservation of women's sexual purity, even the idea of girls being able to write frightened conservatives who warned against the dangers of girls learning to write "love letters."¹⁰ With their fears being compounded by their unfamiliarity with modern schooling, families worried that sending their daughters to school could stain their honour.¹¹

As for freedom of movement, the educated urban woman's freedom of movement extended just as far as, but no further than, her work outside the home justified, while the uneducated urban woman had no possibility of movement outside the home in connection with work.¹² While out in public, both groups had to be covered by veil and over-garment.

The history of theatre serves as a powerful reflection of these strict restrictions that impeded women's participation in public spaces in Kurdistan, and Iraq in general, where expectations about modesty and gender roles are deeply rooted.

The Question of Female Acting in Iraq

Given what came above, it was unthinkable for a woman in Kurdistan, or Iraq in general, to consider acting as a career. Theatre is a public art which means that for women to participate in it, they had to overcome almost all the restrictions that society had placed upon them: restrictions on their education, physical appearance, movement, public presence and working in mixed-gender environments. For a woman to go on the theatre stage, therefore, was to challenge all the deeply rooted traditional gender norms at the same time. This could prove seriously detrimental to her and her family's reputation.

¹⁰ Aşna, Umêd, *Pîremêrd û Pêdaçûneweyêkî Nwêy Jiyan û Berhemekani* (Pîremêrd and a New Exploration of His Life and Works) vol. 1 (Erbil: Aras, 2001), 27.

¹¹ Berzencî, Yasîn Qadir, *Şanoy Kurdî* (Kurdish Theatre) (Sulaymaniyah: Govarî Şano, 2007), 24.

¹² Ibid., 171.

Aside from the societal restrictions on women, acting itself was looked down on as a disgraceful activity. “Acting”, “performing” and “theatre” were words associated with nightclubs (*malha*) and female dancers and singers who worked there. These nightclubs began appearing in Baghdad and other urban centres in the 1920s.¹³ Female performers who worked in these new establishments were seen as “deeply compromised and morally dangerous in the eyes of many.”¹⁴ These performers were referred to as “artists” (*fannanat*) and, as such, the negative connotations of moral ambiguity and sex work associated with their workplace could stain the reputation of any woman who entertained the idea of becoming an actress. Therefore, for decades, theatre remained a disreputable occupation for Iraqi women as stage was associated to nightclubs.¹⁵

The disrepute of the profession of acting and the stigmatisation of female acting in Arab Iraq meant that theatre throughout Iraq remained an all-male activity and the practice of men playing women became an accepted convention. From the founding of modern Iraq in 1921 until the fifties and even the sixties it was customary for male actors in disguise to perform female roles with actor ‘Abdul Jabbar ‘Abbas (1933-1996) portraying the character Umm ‘Ali (Ali’s mother) as late as 1966.¹⁶ This practice was not exclusive to Iraq and was in fact characteristic of early Arabic drama, dating back to al-Naqqash in Lebanon.¹⁷

Given the societal restrictions limiting Muslim women’s public life, the first female performers in the Arab world were from among non-Muslim minorities.¹⁸ Early Iraqi cinema drew its first actresses from among the more prominent of female singers; ‘*Alyā* and ‘*Isām*’ (1948), for example, starred the renowned Iraqi Jewish singer Salima Murad. In nightclubs, theatre troupes were formed which employed female dancers, many of them Jewish or Christian. Scholarship on this nascent stage of Iraqi theatre is sparse and little is known about these actresses other than their names: Mary Konka, Badria Muhammad, Fawzia Jijan and Amina Sa‘id.¹⁹

¹³ Olsen, Olsen, Pelle Valentin, “Nocturnal Baghdad: Nightclubs and popular Entertainment,” in *The Arab Nahda as Popular Entertainment: Mass Culture and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Auji, Hala, Cormack, Raphael and Mahmoud, Alaaeldin (London, UK: I. B. Tauris, 2023), 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁵ Kishtainy, Khalid, “Women in Art and Literature,” in *The Awakened: Women in Iraq*, ed. Ingrams, Doreen (London, UK: Third World Center, 1983), 132.

¹⁶ Hassan, Latif, “Fuṣūl min tārikh al-masrah al-‘Irāqī: ra’idāt al-masrah al-‘Irāqī” (Chapters from the History of Iraqi Theatre: Female Pioneers of Iraqi Theatre), *al-Nnas*, May 19, 2006, <http://al-nnas.com/CULTURE/Fnon/teat13.htm>.

¹⁷ Badawi, M. M., “Arabic drama: early developments,” in *Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. Badawi, M. M. (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 332.

¹⁸ Landau, Jacob M., *Studies in the Arab Theater and Cinema* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1958), 68, 76.

As theatre began to professionalize in the 1940s, wives or sisters of male artists were encouraged by them to participate in theatrical activities, among them Majida al-Sa'di, wife of Iraqi actor and director Ja'far al-Sa'di.²⁰ Despite these initial entries, the negative perception surrounding acting persisted for at least another decade. This is starkly illustrated by the fact that the theatre department of Baghdad's Institute of Fine Arts ran all-male classes from its establishment in 1945 until 1959, when the young Armenian actress Azadouhi Samuel (1942-2023) finally enrolled as its first female student.²¹

Like in Arab Iraq, women were completely absent from the stage in Kurdistan. Traditions that had restricted or prohibited girls' education would hardly permit women onto the theatre stage. Familial pressures and tribal social traditions hindered women's public life, ensuring that theatre remained an exclusively male activity for almost five decades. It is this specific context in Kurdistan, particularly the city of Sulaymaniyah, which the following discussion will focus on.

The Early Kurdish Theatre

Theatre, in the Western sense of the term, first appeared in Iraqi Kurdistan within the urban milieu. In Sulaymaniyah, the grassroots theatre movement was initiated in the mid-1920s by male schoolteachers who used the profits from ticket sales to support schools and students from low-income households. At the time, there were no drama schools in Kurdistan nor in Baghdad. The actors were mainly teachers and schoolboys, and the plays were either Kurdified versions of Arabic plays that the teachers had seen during their studies in Baghdad, or experimental attempts by the educated elite. In the absence of purpose-built theatres, the plays were staged at schools or any other public or private space available.

Although infrequent, these theatrical activities were welcomed and supported passionately by the educated class who saw theatre as a marker of modernity. Mass education and the preservation and promotion of the native language were primary concerns of the urbanized Kurdish elite of the post-World -War-I era who, although had failed to realise their dream of an independent Kurdistan,

¹⁹ "al-masrah fī al-malahī wa-al-maqāhī al-Baghdādīyah," *al-Ta'ākhī*, November 4, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180810205940/http://www.altaakhipress.com/viewart.php?art=64196>.

²⁰ Hassan, Ra'ida al-masrah al-'Irāqī.

²¹ Ibid.

continued in their efforts to forge a modern nation. They did so by supporting educational institutions, literacy programs and cultural activities. In this context, supporting theatre served the dual purpose of enriching the cultural life of the community and promoting literacy through raising funds for schools.

As one of the main goals of plays in Kurdistan was raising money for the benefit of schools and schoolchildren and other charitable causes, the attendance of men, particularly well-to-do ones, was prioritised by theatre groups. This continued well into the 1950s when theatrical performances became more frequent. Tickets were of different values and the audiences were divided based on their social status—as well as their sex (see Figure 2). In the 1950s, theatrical productions would run for a few days, each day for a different group of audiences such as the nobility and the upper class, government officials, women and children, the working class, or students.²²



Figure 2. A flyer advertising the play *Gorhelken* (Gravedigger, 1970) by Sulaymaniyah Acting and Music Group specifies different dates of the month for male and female attendance.

Societal taboos prohibited women from attending performances alongside men. When in 1926, the first play in Sulaymaniyah was performed in a house belonging to a woman from the landed aristocracy, women watched the performance from neighbouring rooftops.²³ Three decades later, the segregation of sexes in public venues was still the rule in Sulaymaniyah, as per Henny Hansen's field research. In her description of women's attendance in Sulaymaniyah cinemas in 1957, Hansen wrote,

²² Berzencî, *Şanoy Kurdî*, 118–19.

²³ See Berzencî, *Şanoy Kurdî*, 14.

[I]t would have been quite unthinkable for the women, even though closely veiled, to sit in the ordinary seats. The men sat there. For the women and the men of their family who accompanied them there were boxes with special entrances and a curtain. This curtain was not drawn aside until the theatre was dark, and was again drawn at the interval. Men in the audience must not obtain a glimpse of the women in the box.²⁴

Segregation of audiences based on sex and social class continued into the seventies until 1973 when the Progressive Kurdish Theatre Group, for the first time, invited everyone regardless of their sex or social status to attend one of their performances.²⁵

The norms that restricted female attendance of performances certainly prohibited their participation in them alongside male actors. Breaking these norms proved to be impossible, leading inevitably to male actors having to portray women on stage. The practice of male actors impersonating women on the Kurdish theatre stage continued into the 1970s, when a small number of women started to gradually appear in stage plays and TV dramas. For decades, therefore, theatre continued to be the domain of schoolboys, their teachers, and male artists and intellectuals who bemoaned social customs that prohibited women's participation in society alongside men.

Nationalist Discourse on Women's Rights

Male intellectuals and intelligentsia were the first to challenge restricting cultural and societal norms that looked down on theatre and stopped women from performing on stage. To justify their demands for women to step out of their narrowly prescribed roles and participate in public life, modernist reformers resorted to the language of nationalism, with its emphasis on the value of the national culture as a prerequisite for taking a place in the modern world of nation-states.

Already in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Kurdish intellectuals, like their Arab, Persian and Turkish counterparts, had debated the issue of women within the context of modernity. The Kurdish aristocrats and intellectuals in Istanbul who promoted the idea of a distinct Kurdish nation, argued that the status of women in society was a reflection of society's character and that woman's freedom would bring the Kurds progress, modernity, prosperity,

²⁴ Hansen, *The Kurdish Woman's Life*, 171.

²⁵ Berzencî, *Şanoy Kurdî*, 119.

and ultimately, nationhood.²⁶ To these early nationalists, the first step in the direction of modern progress and nationhood was to promote education for both men and women. An early advocate of women's education in the nineteenth century wrote: "There is no difference between males and females in [pursuing knowledge], if the mullah forbids it [women's education], he is a non-believer."²⁷

The demand for women's education went hand in hand with demand against veiling. Male intellectuals believed that for a nation to prosper, its women had to abandon traditional veiling, attend schools and participate in society. This is evident in the writings of early reformers such as the Iraqi poet Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi (1863-1936), who called for the education of women in Iraq and argued against veiling, forced marriage of adolescent girls, polygamy, and male privileges in divorce.²⁸ Similar sentiments were expressed in Kurdish poetry. In 1941, the Sulaymaniyah poet Sheikh Nûrî Sheikh Salih (1896-1958) condemned face veil (*peçe*) as a disgraceful obstacle stopping women from entering the society of men.²⁹ Writing in 1944 in Sulaymaniyah, Fayege Bêkes (1905-1948) asked Kurdish women to throw away their head-covering (*serpoş*) and join men in their struggle to create a modern nation. He likened men and women to two wings of the nation, without either, the nation could not fly high.³⁰ The calls to women to throw away the veil were part of the broader movement to promote literacy for girls as part of the modernising project. Bêkes and other reformist poets believed that an educated class of men and women would "lift the Kurds among the nations."³¹ This sentiment was clearly expressed in the poetry of Hêmin (1921-1986) who wrote to women to "Break the door, tear up

²⁶ Klein, Janet, "En-Gendering Nationalism: The 'Woman Question' in Kurdish Nationalist Discourse of the Late Ottoman Period," in *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds*, ed. Mojab, Shahrzad (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2001), 28.

²⁷ Mojab, Shahrzad, "Kurdish Women: Overview," in *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures Online*, ed. Joseph, Suad (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2005), 360. Women were not merely the objects of this debate. In Sulaymaniyah, Hepse Khan (1881-1953), from the landed aristocracy, founded an evening school to educate Kurdish women and reportedly established what is considered the first Kurdish women's organization in Iraq; see Meiselas, Susan, *Kurdistan In the Shadow of History*, (NY: Random House, 1997), 378. Upper and middle-class women such as Guzide Khanum Yamulkî and Fatme Mihêdîn, who ran the first school for girls in Sulaymaniyah, also played a significant role in advancing girls' education in the city; see Berzenci, *Şanoy Kurdî*, 21-4.

²⁸ Efrati, Noga, "The Other <Awakening> in Iraq: The Women's Movement in the First Half of the Twentieth Century," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2004): 155, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4145506>.

²⁹ 'Ebdulwahid, Azad, ed., *Dîwanî Şêx Nûrî Şêx Salih* (Sheikh Nûrî Sheikh Salih's Diwan) (Erbil: Aras, 2008), 587.

³⁰ Aşna, Umêd, ed., *Dîwanî Bêkes* (Bêkes' Diwan) (Erbil: Aras, 2005), 38.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

the veil and run to school / The cure to the ills of the Kurdish society is indeed education.”³²

Men were not alone in arguing against veiling. Reportedly, in the 1950s, Sebrîye Nûrî Qadîr (b. 1928), penname Daykî Solav (Solav’s mother), asked fellow Kurdish women to swap their “foreign” *aba* and *peçe* for traditional Kurdish dress.³³ Advocating for traditional dress provided a socially acceptable avenue for Kurdish women to subtly advance their visibility and participation in social life while anchoring it firmly within the acceptable discourse of cultural preservation.

While Kurds were still struggling for self-rule, broader feminist goals were secondary to the popular nationalist cause. Moreover, feminist rhetoric could be construed as antagonistic to the widely held religious beliefs. Therefore, women, like men, were careful to incorporate their feminist demands within the safe confines of nationalist ideology. In a newspaper article in 1927, one of the first students of Sulaymaniyah’s girls’ school blamed the Kurds’ subjugation as a nation on men for their failure to give enough attention to women’s education.³⁴ The modest feminist demands for girls’ education, unveiling, and social participation were, therefore, framed as efforts to preserve and enhance national identity, rather than to directly confront its patriarchal structures.

Nationalist Discourse on Theatre and Women’s Inclusion

Although the modernising efforts eventually led to the establishment of schools for girls, taboos on female acting seemed to be unbreakable. Concerns about honour, reputation, and the perceived impropriety of women appearing in public or mixed-gender environments continued to obstruct them from stepping onto the theatre stage.

The absence of women from the stage, however, did not mean that community theatre groups shied away from plays with female characters or even romantic themes. In fact, since the early years of theatrical performances in Iraqi Kurdistan, classic love stories such as *Mem û Zîn* (Mem and Zîn) had been a staple in theatre groups’ repertoires. *Mem û Zîn*, a tale of star-crossed lovers, first written by the seventeenth-century poet Ehmed Xanî in Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji), was rendered in the Sulaymaniyah dialect in 1934 by the renowned lit-

³² Hêmin, *Dîwanî Hêmin* (Hêmin’s Diwan) (Sulaymaniyah: Azadî, 2008), 114.

³³ Şwan, Reza, “Şa’îrî Nawdarî Mindalan (Daykî Solav),” Peshmergekan, November 18, 2014, <https://peshmergekan.com/?p=31139>.

³⁴ Berzencî, *Şanoy Kurdî*, 25.

erary figure and Sulaymaniyah notable Tofîq Mehmûd Hemze, known as Pîremêrd (old man). This play was staged multiple times since its debut, exclusively featuring all-male casts.

Pîremêrd, who took great interest in modernizing efforts, such as promoting education, arts and literature, was also an ardent supporter of theatre and wrote a number of plays for the stage. For him, theatre was a tool of national importance, serving to impart moral lessons, celebrate the nation's cultural heritage, and, perhaps most significantly, provide financial support for the publicly funded school founded by him and other members of the Kurdish elite. It was this last purpose that led him to use his newspaper to actively promote public attendance of theatrical performances, even calling it a national duty.³⁵

Pîremêrd used the same nationalist language in his defence of women's rights, and by incorporating feminist messages in his plays, made theatre a pioneering platform for feminism in Kurdistan. Women's confinement to their homes and their lack of education, Pîremêrd believed, resulted in the poor upbringing of their sons.³⁶ Besides, to him and many of his contemporaries across the region, the status of women in a country was an indicator of modernisation. Therefore, in addition to his advocacy for women's education, he criticised forced and arranged marriages of girls, concerns that were expressed by female characters in his plays including *Mem û Zîn* (1934) and *Mehmûd Aqa Şêwekel* (1936).³⁷ These feminist sentiments were expressed on stage by boy actors such as Sheikh Nûrî Sheikh Celal who played Zîn, the Juliet-like character in *Mem û Zîn*, in 1935.

Pîremêrd passed away in 1950, missing the historic moment when, for the first time, a female actor portrayed Zîn on stage. In 1958, this milestone was achieved by the ten-year-old Gulzar 'Umer Tofîq, marking the first time a female actor appeared on stage in Sulaymaniyah alongside male actors, performing for a male audience (Figure 3).³⁸ Despite her young age, Gulzar's role in the production of *Mem û Zîn* was celebrated as a pioneering moment for "Kurdish women" (*afretî kurd*), earning her the title of the first Kurdish "woman" on stage.³⁹

³⁵ Ibid., 41.

³⁶ Aşna, *Pîremêrd û Pêdaçûneweyêkî Nwêy Jiyan û Berhemekanî*, 26.

³⁷ Ibid., 26–8. For detailed discussion of these plays, see Rostami, *Kurdish Nationalism on Stage*, 75–82.

³⁸ Since 1930, schoolgirls in Sulaymaniyah had performed in school plays. These all-female performances were attended only by women. See Berzencî, *Şanoy Kurdî*, 26–8.

³⁹ Berzencî, *Şanoy Kurdî*, 96.



Figure 3. Gulzar 'Umer Tofiq in *Mem û Zîn* (1958). From Gulzar 'Umer Tofiq's personal archive.

This achievement was propelled by the newly established Kurdish Society of Fine Arts (1957-1963), which, desperate for female performers, had to rely on its members to recruit from within their own families. Cihan 'Umer Tofiq, Gulzar's older brother, was a member of the Society, and it was him who pitched to her sister the role of Zîn and convinced her to play the role.⁴⁰ At a time when it was common for girls as young as 12 or 13 to be married off as a way to "protect" their virtue and the family's reputation from the perceived risks of premarital relationships or sexual activity, Gulzar's entry onto the theatre stage transgressed society's gender expectations at the risk of stigma, gossip, or suspicion about her character.

To defend against the anticipated public censure, Gulzar would preface each performance with a direct address. Reading from a script penned for her by a man, she would lecture the audience members about the nobility of the profession of acting, urging them to allow their daughters' entry onto the stage.⁴¹ Crucially, this defence was bolstered by invoking nationalist sentiment as a powerful counter-narrative: her portrayal of a folkloric Kurdish character was framed as a noble contribution to national culture and heritage.⁴² Not surprisingly, it was through the nationalist dis-

⁴⁰ Ehmedmîrza Kawe, *Şanoy Kurdî-Silêmanî: Le Damezrandinyewe Ta Raperîni 1991* (Kurdish Theatre - Sulaymaniyah: From its emergence to the 1991 uprising) (Sulaymaniyah: Sulaymaniyah Theatre Festival, 2011), 22; Berzencî, *Şanoy Kurdî*, 95.

⁴¹ Berzencî, *Şanoy Kurdî*, 95-6. See also "Bernamey wênegrâfî legel Gulzar 'Umer Tofiq," *Kurdsat*, May 31, 2023, <https://youtu.be/AzUDLeMT7Sc>.

⁴² Berzencî, *Şanoy Kurdî*, 95-6.

course that Gulzar, or more precisely, the Society, sought to legitimize her presence on stage and counter accusations that she was violating traditional propriety.

Mem û Zîn was staged at a theatre hall in the boys' secondary school, where Gulzar's performance inspired other middle-school-aged girls to participate in theatrical activities in Sulaymaniyah. Nermîn Nakam appeared in *Tawanî Çî Bû* (What Was Her Crime) in June 1958. Gelawêj Sabir Koyî appeared in *Kawey Asinger* (Blacksmith Kawa) in 1959. Another play from 1959 lists Direxşan Arif, Hêro Goran and Melihe Reşîd as actors. In 1960, Gezîze Fayeq Bêkes appeared in *Şewî Kotayî* (The Deciding Night) and Nermîn Nakam in *Emrekey Begim* (My Lord's Command). In 1961, Necat Mehwî appeared in two plays, *Bûkî Jêr Dewarî Reş* (The Bride Under the Black Tent) and a short comedy *Xesû Ya Ejdiha* (Mother-in-law or Monster) (see Figures 4, 5 and 6). These young girls' entry into the acting scene was publicly interpreted and embraced as a patriotic act—women serving the nation alongside men. The Kurdish press lauded these young actresses and their supportive fathers, framing their stage presence as allowing women to “serve their nation shoulder to shoulder with their brothers.”⁴³



Figure 4. A play from 1959. From Re'ûf 'Elî Mastaw's archive.

What all these young actresses had in common was that they were from the educated class and renowned families of Sulaymaniyah. Necat Mehwî was a descendent of the poet Mehwî; Hêro Goran was daughter of the poet Goran; Gezîze was daughter of the poet Fayeq Bêkes; and Nermîn Nakam was daughter of journalist, poet and activist Sa'îd Nakam. Their entry onto the stage was, therefore, facilitated by their progressive fathers who, despite the negative social

⁴³ Ibid., 104.

stigma of acting, appreciated the value of theatre as an art form and permitted their daughters to participate in theatrical activities.⁴⁴

Sa'îd Nakam, in addition to supporting his daughter's acting, wrote an anti-monarchist play that was staged in Sulaymaniyah in 1959 in the aftermath of the military coup that turned Iraq into a republic.⁴⁵ The intertwining of political and cultural progressivism in the post-revolutionary years occurred despite significant societal resistance and conservative backlash. In an interview, Pişko Nakam, recalled how his sister, Nermîn, went on stage at a time when "there were fights in Sulaymaniyah over women going out unveiled."⁴⁶

Iraqi society in general was imbued with a revolutionary spirit following the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958. The new government, influenced by leftist and anti-imperialist political culture, enacted a Personal Status Law in 1959 that granted Iraqi women unprecedentedly progressive rights in key areas like marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody.⁴⁷ Women were also encouraged to take on a more active role in public life, including in theatre.⁴⁸ Judging by theatrical outputs in Sulaymaniyah, the revolutionary atmosphere lasted at least during the first few years of the republic. Socialist and nationalist sentiments were expressed in folk tales of heroism, such as Blacksmith Kawa's rebellion against the tyrant king in the play *Kawey Asinger* (1959).

This embrace of national liberation narratives, however, did not necessarily translate into a rejection of traditional gender roles. While such plays championed themes of liberation, justice and equality, the understanding of those themes often remained gendered, preserving traditional expectations for women. This complexity is illustrated by *Bûkî Jêr Dewarî Reş* (1961), a play from the period, which depicted the bravery and patriotism of Kurdish men, but intertwined this with a love story between a well-to-do tribal (*begzade*) boy and a peasant girl that pointedly emphasised the chastity of Kurdish women

⁴⁴ This built upon earlier examples of progressivism in Sulaymaniyah, like young girls from notable families attending boys' schools in 1920, when there were yet no school for girls; see Edmonds, "The place of the Kurds in the Middle Eastern scene," 151.

⁴⁵ Berzencî, *Şanoy Kurdî*, 97.

⁴⁶ "Pişko Nakam bas le ezmûnî karî midiyayî xoy dekat: karîgerî bawkim leser hemû endamanî xêzaneke hemêbûwe," KhakTV, August 25, 2023, <https://fb.watch/vSuRYebh8d/>. Pişko and his brother Simko Nakam both were active in the theatre scene with the latter writing successful plays in the 1970s.

⁴⁷ Al-Ali, Nadje, "The Iraqi Women's Movement: Past and Contemporary Perspectives," in *Mapping Arab Women's Movements: A Century of Transformation from Within*, eds. Pernille Arenfeldt and Nawar Al-Hassan Golley (Cairo and NY: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012), 96.

⁴⁸ Hassan, "Rā' idāt al-masrah al-'Irāqī."

and the “purity” of (pre-marital) Kurdish romance.⁴⁹ This focus underscores how upholding conventional female virtue was still integral to the national identity being portrayed, even within seemingly progressive socialist/nationalist frameworks.

While it was socially and morally revolutionary for teenage girls, often from respected and educated families, to participate in these theatrical activities of the post-coup years, their involvement was carefully managed to mitigate conservative backlash. They typically occupied small roles, often portraying loyal wives or fiancées within narratives centred on the bravery of their husbands or male relatives. Crucially, these young female actors appeared exclusively in plays perceived as having significant social, political, or cultural merit, deliberately avoiding genres that could more easily be interpreted by conservative elements as frivolous, inappropriate, or morally transgressive for women.⁵⁰ For example, *Mem û Zîn* was based on a classic Kurdish tale, and its dramatization was framed as a vital service to the national cause through the revival of a revered literary classic.⁵¹ *Tawanî Çî Bû*, another play from 1958, challenged violence against women in the name of honour and was promoted in the press as a story that tackled “an important social ill” of the Kurds’.⁵² In the rare instance when Necatî Mehmedî appeared in a comedy, *Mother-in-law or Monster*, she was assigned the role of the bride, while the titular role of the mother-in-law, likely offering greater comedic potential and demanding louder stage presence, more pronounced physical comedy, and significantly more dialogue, was entrusted to the talented male actor, Teha Xelîl.

In these plays, young actresses often played opposite men who were ten or even twenty years their senior. Mem was played by actor and musician Qadir Dîlan, who was twenty years older than Gulzar ‘Umer Tofîq. Kameran Mukrî was thirty years old when he appeared as Blacksmith Kawe in *Kawey Asinger* opposite the teenage Gelawêj Sabîr Koyî who played his wife (see Figure 5).

While the revolutionary spirit and the treatment of serious socio-political topics allowed for the participation of young girls alongside male actors on stage,

⁴⁹ Berzencî, *Şanoy Kurdî*, 101. The trope of virtuous Kurdish woman was a typical feature of Kurdish plays, since Ebdulrehîm Rehmî Hekarî (1890-1958) wrote the first Kurdish drama in 1919.

⁵⁰ It was still men like Teha Xelîl (1940-2010) or ‘Umer Çawşîn (1942-2023) who played the more interesting and memorable female characters in plays, and later in TV dramas. Çawşîn (meaning blue-eyed) is particularly remembered for his convincing impersonation of female roles.

⁵¹ Berzencî, *Şanoy Kurdî*, 96.

⁵² Ibid., 87–8.

another important factor to consider is that these young girls were usually accompanied by male relatives during rehearsals and performances. At a time when segregation of sexes was the norm and girls were not to mix with strange men for fear of their reputation, the presence of their male relatives provided the support and encouragement needed for young girls to participate in the male-dominated theatre scene. Fayeḡ Mehwi and Simko Nakam, for example, appeared alongside their sisters respectively in *Bûkî Jêr Dewarî Reş* and *Tawanî Çî Bû*, enabling them to enter a space that would have otherwise been inaccessible to them (see Figure 5). A brother accompanying his sister served to protect her and her family's reputation in a community where family honour was closely tied to how women were perceived in public. The practice of casting male and female relatives together was not limited to Kurdistan and occurred in the Arab world as well, as a way to navigate social disapproval of female performers.⁵³



Figure 5. Nermîn Nakam and her younger brother Simko in *Tawanî Çî Bû* (1958)

While the involvement of young girls in the cultural life of Sulaymaniyah during 1958-1961 was seen as pioneering and hailed as the first instance of “women” acting on the theatre stage, it was by no means tantamount to a movement or a signifier of fundamental change in Kurdish society. Adult married women were still absent from the stage and male actors continued to play female characters, as was the case in *Mem û Zîn* and other plays from this period. The negative public perception of acting was still strong and influential on families who feared for their reputation. Gulzar ‘Umer Tofiq, who is celebrated as the first female actor in Kurdistan, was obstructed by her merchant father from

⁵³ Al-Ra’i, Ali, “Arabic drama since the thirties,” in *Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. Badawi, M. M. (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 400.

acting in any more productions due to fears for their reputation.⁵⁴ *Mem û Zîn*, therefore, remained Gulzar's only theatrical experience.

Theatre activities in Sulaymaniyah came to a complete halt from 1961 to 1968 as a result of the Kurdish uprising of September 1961.⁵⁵ The Kurdish Society of Fine Arts dissolved in 1963 and most of the young female actors, including Gulzar, grew up to become teachers working in their hometown. Like in many conservative societies, teaching was considered a respectable profession for girls as it aligned with societal norms that accepted women working in all-female or predominantly female environments, such as girls' schools.



Figure 6. Necat Mehwi with dramatist Emîn Mîrzakerîm in 1959. From 'Umer Mehwi's archive.

First Women to Enter the Stage

The stigma associated with female acting remained strong even a decade later when the Iraqi-Kurdish War finally ended with the 1970 Autonomy Agreement. While cultural life revived in the post-war environment with the establishment of several theatre groups, acting remained a predominantly male activity. This is evident in 'Umer 'Elî Emîn's account of his group's difficulties in finding a female actor for one of their plays in 1969.⁵⁶ According to 'Elî Emîn, his group

⁵⁴ "Bernamey wênegrafi legel Gulzar 'Umer Tofiq."

⁵⁵ Ehmedmîrza, *Şanoy Kurdî-Silêmanî*, 30.

⁵⁶ Daniş, Aştî 'Usman, "Xwalêxoşbû 'Umerî 'Elî Emîn Le Dwayîn Didarda" (The Late Omar Ali

were finally able to convince a girl named Rûnak Heme Reşîd to appear in their play but they were faced with her parents' disapproval. Therefore, in the same way that a suitor seeks a father's blessing, the group had to sit with Rûnak's parents and formally request their permission for her to play a part in their production.⁵⁷ Even after consent was given, it was conditional upon constant chaperoning by Rûnak's mother, who accompanied her to all performances, including out-of-town tours. This proved to be Rûnak's only acting experience, reflecting the societal and familial pressures that discouraged women from acting and ensured that cross-gender casting persisted in theatre.

In November 1971, Sulaymaniyah's Kurdish Art and Literature Society called on women to join men on stage. Nationalism was still the legitimizing discourse, not only for female acting but for acting in general:

Dear sister, we have been pursuing acting, knowing that the theatre is considered a holy (*pîroz*) place all over the world, as it enlightens the nations and shows them the way to prosper. Kurdish theatre has a major disadvantage and that is your absence. You do not pursue acting and therefore do not serve your nation like your brothers... Why should men still be playing female roles...⁵⁸

The Society then proceeded to address Kurdish parents, pleading them to "destroy this obstacle" by allowing their daughters to participate in theatre so that the "Kurdish nation" could benefit from a flourishing theatre scene.⁵⁹ Interestingly, some men within these artistic circles who wrote so passionately about theatre, were reluctant to encourage their own female family members to pursue acting.⁶⁰

During the 1970s, a few male artists practiced what they preached by introducing their daughters to acting. Among these were Teha Xelîl, Fu'ad Heme Emîn, and 'Umer 'Elî Emîn. In 1970, 'Elî Emîn joined other actors to form a theatre group which they named Gezîze's Friends (*Hawrêyanî Gezîze*), a tribute to the group's youngest member, 'Elî Emîn's daughter Gezîze (b. 1961) (Figure 7).⁶¹

Amin in His Last Interview), *Şano*, no. 12 (2009): 51.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ehmedmîrza, *Şanoy Kurdî-Silêmanî*, 125–26.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 126

⁶⁰ 'Ebdulrehman 1978?, 19

⁶¹ Inspired by her father, Gezîze, who was a beloved child actor, grew up to become a prominent figure in Kurdish theatre, as a playwright, actor and director. She graduated from Baghdad Academy of Fine Arts in 1988 and taught at Sulaymaniyah Institute of Fine Arts for 14 years. She also formed her own Gezîze's Friends theatre group in 2004, focusing on training female actors and portraying Kurdish women's issues.



Figure 7. Gezîze's Friends theatre group. Source: kurdipedia.org

The 1970s ushered in a new era for Kurdish actors who were, for the first time, able to record their performances for TV in Baghdad. In the early days of Kurdish TV drama, it was common for dramatic productions recorded in TV studios to be performed in one continuous take. As a result, recorded performances closely resembled live theatre, often matching the length of a typical theatrical performance.⁶² The first Kurdish woman to appear in a Kurdish TV drama by a Sulaymaniyah acting group was 'Etiye Mihemed Emîn, stage name Daykî Aryan (Aryan's mother). Born in 1950 in Penjwin, Sulaymaniyah, 'Etiye married in 1963 and moved with her family to Baghdad, where, a few years later, she happened to meet a group of Kurdish actors from Sulaymaniyah. With little concern for her lack of experience, the group who were delighted to have found a Kurdish woman, persuaded 'Etiye to join their productions. Her consent was essential, but obtaining her husband's approval was more critical. The group met with her husband and gained his approval which he gave on the condition of accompanying his wife to and from work.⁶³ 'Etiye subsequently became the first adult female actor in Kurdish TV dramas recorded in Baghdad TV's studio in 1970 (see Figures 8 and 9).⁶⁴ She went on to have a long career in stage, film and TV, working with different theatre groups in Sulaymaniyah.

While she had her husband's support, 'Etiye's choice of stage name reflected her desire for a degree of anonymity and respect in a society that continued to look down on acting

⁶² This approach required actors and crew to rehearse extensively to ensure a seamless production, as there was little room for errors.

⁶³ "Karlêk–Daykî Aryan tewarêkî hunermend," *Kurdsat*, April 6, 2016, <https://youtu.be/QUI8JIDjTXI>

⁶⁴ Tenya, Hesên, *Şano û Şanoy Kurdewarî* (Theatre and Kurdish Theatre) (Baghdad: Dar Al-Afaq Arabia for Press and Publishing, 1985), 74

and female actors. It is a prevalent practice in traditional communities for a husband to not address his wife by her name, but by her child's name as "Mother of so-and-so". Daykî Aryan, as a teknonym, or *kunya*, emphasises the woman's role in the family structure and preserves her modesty in public, as calling a woman directly by her first name in public can be considered too personal or intimate. Although she had broken the taboos by becoming an actor, 'Etiye's stage name aligned with cultural norms around modesty and boundaries between genders.



Figure 8. Daykî Aryan and Gezîze, along with male actors from Sulaymaniyah—1970



Figure 9. Daykî Aryan, Gezîze and other Sulaymaniyah actors alongside Baghdad TV staff in studio—1970

Another veteran actor with a long career in stage, TV and film is Exter Kerîm (b. 1952) who was 15 or 16 and a worker at the Sulaymaniyah tobacco factory

when she was approached by a group of actors in need of a female actor. Kerîm, who had dropped out of school at a young age, could not read but she was eager to go on stage and perform. She had a supportive father who would help her memorise her lines by reading them to her.⁶⁵ His father encouraged her to pursue acting seriously, even in the face of negative gossip and criticism. Kerîm tried, albeit with limited success, to encourage her friends to join local theatrical productions. Speaking about her attempts to convince other women to act, Exter Kerîm uses the nationalist language of “serving our nation”, proving once again that nationalism was still the “honourable door” through which women could enter in order to participate at new levels of public life.⁶⁶

The 1970s also saw the first Kurdish woman to graduate in the field of theatre from Baghdad’s Academy of Fine Arts. In 1968 when Bedî’e Dartaş (b. 1946) enrolled at the Academy, she had no love for acting or desire to become an actor, but her grades met the Academy’s thresholds, and she could graduate with a degree that would allow her to find employment as a teacher. Being the only female student in her class, she soon felt out of place and came close to quitting and returning to her hometown, Sulaymaniyah. It was only at the request and firm insistence of one of her professors, the veteran Iraqi artist Ibrahim Jalal, that Dartaş agreed to stay. According to Dartaş, Jalal appealed to her sense of patriotism by telling her about the role theatre could play in being the voice of Kurdish resistance; and that she could be “the mother of her nation” by defending the Kurdish sons who were fighting in the mountains.⁶⁷

Daykî Aryan, Exter Kerîm and Bedî’e Dartaş were all accidental actors in that none of them actively sought to become an actor. In fact, they all became actors at the request and urging of men. To this generation of women, female acting was not challenging patriarchal, social and cultural norms, rather, it complemented them by working alongside men to serve the nation and uphold the national culture. From what these veteran female actors have said in interviews it can be inferred that they had internalized the patriarchal system and the norms surrounding honour, actively upholding these values even as they sought to participate in public life. These women, who in their youth wore their hair uncovered, now adopt the modest attire characteristic of older Kurdish women, their hair and bodies draped in traditional Kurdish clothing.

⁶⁵ “Bernamey le yadime be beşdarî Exter Kerîm şanokarî dêrîn,” KhakTV, June 1, 2023, <https://youtu.be/D4H1Q1L2Xts>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ “Pencemor–Beşî 2– Bedî’e Dartaş: Berdewam nwêj dekem û rûm le xwaye,” Rudaw Stream, August 7, 2024, <https://youtu.be/7yZ549GGzHU>.

These pioneering female actors voice the common view on women's respectability being tied to their modesty, a point exemplified by Daykî Aryan's suggestion that, when a woman is allowed certain freedoms by her father, she should protect his honour by not overstepping the boundaries.⁶⁸ Bedî'e Dartaş shares the same values and beliefs about honour. According to her, when she left to Baghdad for her studies, her father had only one demand from her and that was "to protect her honour."⁶⁹ Dartaş not only adhered to her father's advice throughout her student life by staying away from men, she also carried those values into her career, becoming a firm disciplinarian when she began teaching at the Institute of Fine Arts in Sulaymaniyah in 1980. Known for her unwavering commitment to upholding "Kurdish" principles of decorum and respect, she implemented and enforced strict rules, particularly concerning interactions between male and female students, ensuring that boundaries were maintained in accordance with traditional notions of honour.⁷⁰

While Daykî Aryan, Exter Kerîm and Bedî'e Dartaş managed to have long careers in acting, many were not so lucky. An article from the late 1970s sheds light on the challenges faced by female actors in Kurdistan who, in earlier years, had dared to take to stage. The piece highlighted how societal constraints stifled some of these women's careers and pointed out the challenges of interviewing them: "Some of those who served the Kurdish theatre back then do not want to speak about those days. Some are busy with their children; others are restricted by husbands who wouldn't even allow their photos to be published. In some cases, families wouldn't even let us meet these women, who are confined to the four walls of their rooms."⁷¹ The female actors that the author was eventually able to interview were Nermîn Nakam, Awaz Mehmûd, Bedî'e Dartaş, Şadan Fu'ad, Azade Celal and Şilêr.⁷²

When asked why Kurdish women fear acting, Nermîn Nakam, who had long left the stage, explained: "Women are rightfully afraid because men—fathers, brothers, relatives, friends, husbands—view acting as disgraceful (*neng*). A woman who steps onto the stage once or twice quits soon after because people point derisive fingers at her in the streets; or maybe she marries a man who doesn't understand art."⁷³ Awaz Mehmûd, born in 1963 and described as brim-

⁶⁸ "Karlêk–Daykî Aryan tewarêki hunermend."

⁶⁹ "Bedî'e Dartaş delêt bawkim ke nardimî bo beqda gutî, şerefî xom dedeme destit, rûm reş nekeyt," Rudaw Media Network, August 2, 2024, <https://youtu.be/5Fo0zcu6iGo>.

⁷⁰ "Bedî'e Dartaş daykî şanoy kurdî," Kurdsat, June 18, 2023, <https://youtu.be/KfE95e308b4>.

⁷¹ 'Ebdulrehman, Şêrzad, "Afretî Kurd û Şano" (Kurdish Woman and Theatre), *Rojî Kurdistan*, 1978?, 17.

⁷² Şadan Fu'ad is daughter of Fu'ad Heme Emîn, mentioned earlier.

⁷³ 'Ebdulrehman, "Afretî Kurd û Şano," 18.

ming with hope and dreams, blamed society's cruel treatment of women for extinguishing the aspirations of many young actresses.⁷⁴ Her own dream was reportedly crushed in 1980 when she quit acting after enduring taunts in her hometown, Erbil, for her role in the TV drama *Hebû Nebû*.⁷⁵ A specific scene where she held hands with a male actor drew particular ire, cementing her decision to leave the profession.⁷⁶ Şilêr summarised the situation poignantly: "Women are not afraid of acting, but society scares them into isolation. A woman is afraid the moment she is born and continues to live under the shadow of the monster that is gossip."⁷⁷

Nationalism Perpetuating Gender Norms

Grace Kelly's father thought of acting "a slim cut above streetwalker," a sentiment that was shared by many in Kurdistan during the early years of stage plays and TV dramas. Female actors were viewed with disdain, as society often equated their profession with improper behaviour or moral transgression. Women's public visibility, particularly in the performing arts, was frequently conflated with a loss of virtue and respectability, reflecting deeply ingrained cultural norms. To legitimize female acting as an honourable profession, women had to associate it with the broader goal of defending the nation and strengthening national culture, rather than challenge those traditional gender norms. Their feminist struggle, therefore, was inherently tied to nationalism, as both male and female actors had to justify their existence through nationalist discourse. Without nationalism to open the doors to public life, the urban woman in Kurdistan was imprisoned within her home, while all male family members were legally sanctioned to punish her if she was suspected of inappropriate behaviour.⁷⁸

Nationalism was to grow even stronger in the decades that followed. The collapse of the autonomy agreement between the Kurds and Baghdad in 1974 reignited the conflict between Kurdish militias and the Iraqi Baath regime. As violence against the Kurds intensified through the 1980s—culminating in the Anfal massacres and the chemical bombing of Halabja in 1988—so too did the nationalist sentiment that permeated most theatrical productions of the era. Popular plays predominantly featured male heroism juxtaposed with female loyalty

⁷⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁵ "Awaz Mehmûd," Kurdipedia, last modified January 31, 2023, <https://www.kurdipedia.org/?q=201003172306463993&lng=1>.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ 'Ebdulrehman, "Afretî Kurd û Şano," 20.

⁷⁸ Teyfûr, *Mafî Jin Le Komelî Kurdewarîda*, 196–99.

or the trope of the damsel in distress. Plays based on folk heroic tales, like *Qelay Dimdim* (The Dimdim Fortress, 1982), portrayed men as heroic defenders of the nation, while women were typically presented as proud mothers or loyal wives. In other plays, female bodies were depicted as pained, broken, and violated, symbolically representing the fate of the Kurdish motherland itself. This was the characteristic of *Nalî û Xewnêkî Erxewanî* (Nalî and a Violet Dream, 1987), a successful nationalist play by the prolific Kurdish dramatist, Ehmed Salar. His iconography depicted women as representations of the nation, with the agony of separation and the eroticization of the homeland as female bodies rearticulating men's duty as lovers, protectors, and saviours of that feminized homeland – leaving women essentially as passive symbols or wailing figures awaiting rescue.⁷⁹

This dynamic exemplifies how nationalism often perpetuates gendered narratives that privilege men as the central actors in the nation's defence, casting them as warriors, leaders, and protectors, while relegating women primarily to symbolic or supportive roles: mothers of the nation, wives embodying purity, or passive symbols preserving national "honour". This of course, was not exclusive to Kurdish nationalism. Indeed, during periods of heightened national crisis like the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) and the subsequent economic sanctions (1990-2003), the Iraqi state actively promoted women's traditional roles, urging them to be "mothers of the future soldiers" and to respect the male "defenders of the nation."⁸⁰ Thus, the nationalist discourse of both the Arab and Kurdish sides, even when appearing to advocate for women's education or participation, frequently operated within and reinforced a framework that ultimately preserved patriarchal structures and traditional gender expectations.

Women's liberation, emancipation, and inclusion, as advocated by male nationalists, often had less to do with principles of egalitarianism and more with paternalistic attempts to widen the base of popular support, viewing women primarily as vehicles for ideologically influencing future generations. This instrumental approach is captured in Saddam Hussein's 1971 speech: "An enlightened mother, who is educated and liberated, can give the country a generation of conscious and committed fighters."⁸¹ This sentiment mirrors earlier Kurdish nationalist discourse, exemplified by the poetry of Pîremêrd who wrote: "A good, educated mother / Brings forth such a generation / That liberates her nation / ... / [A generation] that is self-sacrificing for the country."⁸²

⁷⁹ For a critical discussion of these plays see Rostami, *Kurdish Nationalism on Stage*, 155–214.

⁸⁰ Al-Ali, "The Iraqi Women's Movement," 100.

⁸¹ Ibid., 97.

⁸² Aşna, *Pîremêrd û Pêdaçûneweyekî Nwêy Jiyan û Berhemekanî*, 367–70.

Few months before his death in 1950, Pîremêrd penned verses in praise of the veil (*peçe*), condemning unveiling as “un-Islamic” and warning Kurdish girls who had adopted the brazen “European customs” against giving in to Satan and bringing shame to their fathers.⁸³ “Just as the moon is best seen in the embrace of night, so too is the beauty of a face best appreciated behind a veil,” wrote the once progressive Kurdish poet.⁸⁴ Pîremêrd who had been an early advocate of theatre and greater freedoms for women, was now expressing deeply conservative views that resisted changes to longstanding honour-based value system. It becomes evident that earlier campaigns by male nationalists for women’s rights, such as the right to education, were only to serve the greater national cause and not to shake the foundations of established gender norms and religious authority. Their emphasis on women’s chastity and their reproductive and ideological role within the nationalist project meant that the push for women’s rights beyond the confines of the home did not result in a fundamental shift toward gender equality or breaking away from traditional gender roles and societal expectations.

Conclusion

Writing about the emergence of women’s movements in the modern Middle East, Ellen Fleischmann classified its history into three stages.⁸⁵ In the first stage, or the awakening, reformers and other intellectuals initiated debate on women’s status by openly criticizing social and cultural practices oppressive to women and placing particular emphasis on women’s education. During the second stage, women adopted nationalism “as a liberating discourse, linking it and their own direct involvement in nationalist movements to female emancipation.”⁸⁶ These two stages of development can be clearly observed occurring almost simultaneously in Iraqi Kurdistan, demonstrated in the history of theatre and female acting.

In the 1920s and 1930s, theatre in Iraqi Kurdistan emerged as a tool for promoting modernist principles, including women’s rights, positioning theatre as a pioneering platform for feminist ideas. Early theatrical productions advocated for women’s education and participation in society and condemned outdated

⁸³ Huşyar, Faye, et al., *Sercem Pendekani Pîremêrd* (The Complete Maxims of Pîremêrd) (Sulaymaniyah: Shivan, 2007), 615.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Fleischmann, Ellen L., “The Other “Awakening”: The Emergence of Women’s Movements in the Modern Middle East, 1900–1940,” in *A Social History Of Women And Gender In The Modern Middle East*, ed. Meriwether, Margaret L. and Tucker, Judith E. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 96.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

customs such as arranged marriages of adolescent girls. Later on, by convincing women to appear on stage, theatre makers challenged traditional gender norms that limited women's visibility and presence in public spaces, leveraging nationalist rhetoric that tied women's rights to the nation's development. This was the continuation of the nationalist discourse on the Woman Question developed by early modernist Kurdish intelligentsia whose notion of "lifting" the nation by "lifting" women had pervaded the modernist poets' writings.

Women's contributions to theatre and public life were framed as vital for building a modern state, intertwining female acting—and acting in general—with the broader nationalist agenda. Theatre, therefore, became a powerful medium for questioning social constraints by encouraging audiences to see female acting not as a radical departure from their cultural values but as an essential component of national progress and in service to the national cause. The burgeoning nationalist discourse, however, still largely operated within, and sometimes actively reinforced, a conservative framework regarding female behaviour and virtue. This became more visible in the 1980s, as dramatists frequently relied upon or perpetuated conservative views of women's roles and honour as foundational elements of Kurdish identity.

While honour, in the form of women's sexual purity, remains a deeply ingrained and central value within Kurdish culture, the landscape of social restrictions and female agency has undergone a significant transformation. Specific markers of older constraints, such as the widespread imposition of veiling in the form of the *aba* and *peçe*, have largely receded in many areas. This shift has coincided with, and arguably facilitated, women gaining considerably more agency to pursue higher education and professional careers—including in the historically sensitive field of performing arts—and lead more active social lives.

Whereas in previous decades, deeply embedded concerns about family and community honour frequently thwarted such aspirations, the contemporary situation is markedly different. There is now a steady stream of female graduates from specialized arts programs, ensuring no shortage of trained female actors. Academies of Fine Arts and dedicated Fine Arts Institutes, integrated into the numerous universities across Kurdistan's cities, have proliferated. These local institutions graduate numerous women and men into the arts scene each year. This localized access means young women aspiring to careers in theatre no longer face the necessity of relocating to distant hubs like Baghdad for university-level training—a path earlier pioneers like Bedî'e Dartaş had to navigate. This widespread availability of local training and a comparatively more accepting environment for female participation in the arts signifies a profound evolu-

tion, even as traditional notions of honour continue to shape cultural discourse. Further research into the opportunities, challenges, and societal perceptions faced by women actors today versus those of previous generations could shed light on whether genuine progress has been made in enhancing women's status within the performing arts and whether the barriers once imposed by concerns about honour have truly diminished or if they persist, perhaps in more subtle or transformed ways.

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