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Violence and Motherhood in Kashmir: Loss, Suffering, and Resistance in the Lives of Women

By Shazia Malik¹

Abstract

This paper examines the social and political context of aggrieved mothers in Kashmir through personal narratives collected by the author. The context for this analysis is contemporary Kashmir positioned precariously in geopolitics. The paper attempts to reconstitute the meaning of motherhood within the context of the ethnic culture of Kashmiri Muslim society. At the same time, it seeks to explore how mothers deal with the political situation that is responsible for the early and violent deaths of their children and offers a discursive theoretical framework to demonstrate how mothers find the meaning in their own motherhood. The paper explores, through two case studies, the degree of choice mothers may have in either restraining their sons from joining the current violent political situation through militancy, or in their active resistance to these engagements. The article concludes with reflections on how mothers make sense of their sons' militancy by uniting the political with the emotional intimacy of mothering following the death of their sons.

Keywords: Kashmir, Kashmiri women, motherhood, personal narratives, women's narratives. Kashmiri Muslims, violence and motherhood, militancy.

Introduction

This paper examines the social and political context of aggrieved mothers in Kashmir through personal narratives collected by the author. The theme of motherhood as a counter-piece of feminist analyses has re-emerged in recent years for example in the works of Ellen Ross (1995) and Elleke Boehmer (2005). Studies on motherhood, as Ellen Ross (1995) contends, are in the process of moving from the margins to the centre of feminist discussion, and the mother increasingly a subject rather than a distant, looming object². The context for this analysis is contemporary Kashmir positioned precariously in geopolitics. The paper attempts to reconstitute the meaning of motherhood within the context of the ethnic culture of Kashmiri Muslim society. At the same time, it seeks to explore how mothers deal with the political situation that is responsible for the early and violent deaths of their children and offers a discursive theoretical framework to demonstrate how mothers find the meaning in their own motherhood. The paper explores, through two case studies, the degree of choice mothers may have in either restraining their sons from joining the current violent political situation through militancy, or in their active

¹Assistant Professor, Centre for Women's Studies and Research, University of Kashmir Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir.

²Ross, Ellen, New thoughts on the oldest vocation: Mothers and Motherhood in recent feminist scholarship. Review Essay *Signs: Journal of women culture and society*, 1995, 20(2): 397-413

resistance to these engagements. The article concludes with reflections on how mothers make sense of their sons' militancy by uniting the political with the emotional intimacy of mothering following the death of their sons.

Methodology

Through an ethnographic study, based on two in-depth interviews with aggrieved mothers the present study documents and analyses their firsthand experiences with issues of violence and the political uncertainty to expand traditional notions of motherhood. The present paper also relies on the video recordings of funeral speeches of these mothers. In addition, national and regional newspapers are also important sources of information.

It is important to mention here that both of the women I interviewed for this article gave consent for the recording. I have used pseudonyms to replace the identities of the women, their locations and the names of their militant sons, in order to protect their confidentiality and safety. Initially I collected some videos of funeral speeches by the mothers of dead militants, through friends working as photojournalists. Some parts of videos are available on YouTube as well³. After watching the videos, I tried to get in touch with some of these mothers, through my friends working as journalists, and people I am acquainted with, in their neighborhoods. I am highly thankful to my participants who trusted me and shared valuable and painful experiences with me. Talking about their dead sons is extremely painful and tragic; I therefore started the conversations quite informally. Being someone who shares the same community identity, it was not very difficult for me to convince them to speak to me. Throughout the work, I have tried to adhere strictly to feminist standpoint epistemology, an approach to knowledge construction that breaks down the boundaries between academia and activism by engaging subjectivities. I expressed my deep regrets to them for asking them to remember the horrors while unraveling their stories. However, I am burdened by their expectations of sharing their stories in the right contexts, as perceived by them in their own experiences. I recorded the interviews personally with the aggrieved mothers at their homes in district *Kulgam*, without involving any male member of the family. The interviews took place from December 2018 to April 2019. I interviewed five women and only two have been used for the purpose of this paper. Confirming to the said approach, I strongly agree with Abigail Brook's argument that women, as members of an oppressed group, have cultivated a double consciousness- a heightened awareness not only of their own lives but of the lives of the dominant group (men) as well⁴. This approach as viewed by Abigail Brooks, not only takes women as serious knowers but also attempts to translate women's knowledge into practice, so that what is learned from women's experience can be applied towards social change and elimination of oppression not only for women but for all marginalized groups⁵. Indeed, in collecting information, it was assumed that there is no single/unilateral version of truth, and our subjective experiences and social locations determine our perception of truth or falsehood. Based on the narratives collected for the present study, the chief objective is to construct a picture of the gendered experiences of violence by aggrieved

³ See the following links available on YouTube:

<https://youtu.be/2KmfIESf2cE> , <https://youtu.be/O2FraUTIKtk>

⁴ Abigail Brooks, *Feminist Standpoint Epistemology: Building Knowledge and Empowerment Through Women's Lived Experience*, IN Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, Patricia Lina Leavy (ed.), *Feminist Research Practice*, Sage Publications London, new Delhi, 2007 p.77.

⁵ *Ibid* p.76.

mothers of dead militants. My effort here is to open conversations about the ways in which mothers make sense of the death of militant sons. While doing so, my study seeks to make a qualitative assessment of the impact of violence in Kashmir on mothers. It also aims to uncover the voices of ‘unheard mothers’ to develop broad statements within a feminist framework. One of the efforts is to lend voice to their silence, to provide, as it were, spaces for the articulation of their experiences and agency. My research will, hopefully, allow for further, comparative study and enable interested researchers to build on the idea of discursive responses to motherhood under siege.

Reflections of Motherhood in iconographies of Kashmir

In their iconographies, nation-states have emphasized the roles of women that are stereotypes and connected in some way to women’s biological capacity for mothering⁶. Becoming a mother is a biological function of a woman; however, Adrienne Rich has emphasized that motherhood as both the experience and the institution has a social significance reinforcing a universal feminine role beyond giving birth⁷. Motherhood demands the raising of infants through adulthood and catering to the needs of the children into adulthood. Judith Butler, who describes motherhood as performative, implies that women become mothers not primarily by biological function, but by their culturally encoded lived realities⁸. Irene Oh (2009), further explains that motherhood as performative underlines mothers' agency by focusing upon what mothers self-consciously do rather than what mothers biologically are.⁹ Irene oh (2009) also emphasis the observation of Saba Mahmood, who insists that motherhood as the performative subject can express agency not only through acts of subversion but also through acts of collusion with the dominant culture¹⁰. However Margaret and Dana, in their book *Muslim Mothering Global Histories, Theories and practices*(2016) notes significantly that the Muslim Motherhood has been looked at superficially as passive gendered role in the present global political environment, in which Islam and Muslims are too easily judged and objectified.¹¹Rejecting the dominant western view about Muslim mothering, the book observes there is no unified way in which Muslim women engage in or disengage from the social institution of motherhood¹².Julie Peteet in her article *Icons and Militants: Mothering in the Danger Zone (2005)* approaches mothering as a paradoxical practice that is simultaneously agential and limiting¹³. Julie Peteet advocates that woman, as icons of the nation, is a cultural construct¹⁴. Nevertheless, Zeina Zaatari has observed, in her work focusing on culture of motherhood in Lebanon, that religion has been an important factor which informs women’s activities, choices and practices, aiming to

⁶Elleke Boehmor, Motherlands, Mothers and Nationalist sons: theorizing the en-gendered nation, IN *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, Manchester University Press. (2005), p-324.

⁷Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 10th anniversary edition, New York, 1986.

⁸ See for example: Butler, Judith, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* New York, Routledge, 1993.

⁹Irene Oh, The Performativity of Motherhood: Embodying Theology and Political Agency: *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, Vol. 29, No. 2 ,2009, pp. 3-17

¹⁰Ibid p-4

¹¹ Margaret Aziza Pappano and Dana M. Olwan (ed.) *Muslim Mothering Global Histories, Theories and Practices*, Demeter Press, Canada, 2016, p-4

¹²Ibid p-3

¹³ Julie Peteet, Mothering in the Danger Zone, In, S. Therese, A. Karolyn and H. Judith (ed.), *Gender, Politics and Islam*, Orient Longman, New Delhi,2002, p-133.

¹⁴ Ibid p.134.

promote changes, within their immediate locales and in the ‘nation’ in general.¹⁵ Muslim mothering, like all forms of mothering, can elicit a range of experiences and emotions that are themselves marked by contradictions, tensions, and even ambivalence¹⁶. With this understanding of motherhood, which is neither homogeneous nor passive, which is agential as well as managed, I will try to contextualize what motherhood signifies culturally and religiously in Kashmir. The motive behind going back to traditional notions of motherhood is to see its relevance in today’s politically charged atmosphere of Kashmir.

Two mothers in Kashmiri Mythology the mother of *Aka-nandun* and *Lalded* are important figures in understanding the nature of a form of motherhood that has been idealized in Kashmir. Kashmiri mythology encompasses all religions that flourished here in the past including Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. One of the Kashmiri myths titled *Aka-Nandun* features a character of a young prince being slaughtered in front of his parents to teach them the lessons of detachment and selflessness. An extraordinary Saint agrees to give a son to a royal couple who had seven daughters on the condition that they would return the child to him after twelve years. After twelve years, the Saint reappears and asks the father to slaughter the boy. His mother painfully tries to negotiate with the Saint. He asks the mother to cook his flesh. Once the cooking is done, she is asked to serve the cooked human meat to all family members including the dead boy and the Saint. The deserted mother calls for her slaughtered lad. The young prince then appears alive before his mother, without a single scratch on his body, while the Saint disappears. Kashmiri folklorists see this tale as a lesson of sacrifice, selflessness and detachment from this world.¹⁷ Thus, the story tells us about the pain and agony a mother experiences when her child is taken away. Also, it would follow that the negotiations that the mother had with the Saint were rewarded in sparing his life, unable to stand the pain expressed by the mother. Her wailing finally touched the Saint’s heart such that he recreated him for her, following the trial he put her through. The story is so much part of present folk culture that any male child, whose mother seems over-protective and extra caring, is nicknamed as *Aka-Nandun*.

In the latter phase of the history of Kashmir, the notions of traditional motherhood changed altogether in another Kashmiri mythical story of *Lalded* (Mother Lala). Born to a Brahmin family, her domestic life turned out to be a troubled one, and her husband treated her cruelly. Her mother in law often starved her. At the age of 26 *Lalded* is believed to have renounced home and family and wandered from place to place in search of truth and sang songs in praise of divine love¹⁸. Braving trials and humiliation that came her way, she grew in stature to become a questor and teacher. *Lalded* is regarded as a foundational figure by the Rishi or Sheikh Nurru-din Wali, seen by many as her spiritual son and heir. *Lalded* lived through a time of seismic turbulence during the Kashmir’s transition to Islam¹⁹. Far from being a passive spectator she was aware of the changes in her surroundings—which were leading to a redefinition of state, society and religious affiliations—and was capable of questioning them. She played a significant role in setting the course for the integration of these changes into the historical

¹⁵Zaatari, Zen, The Culture of Motherhood: An Avenue for Women's Civil Participation in South Lebanon, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, Duke University Press Vol. 2, No. 1, 2006, pp. 33-64 Duke University Press.

¹⁶Op.cit, Irene 2009, p.7.

¹⁷The story has been cited from, S.L. Sadhu, *Folk Tales from Kashmir*, Kashmir News Network, <http://www.koausa.org/folktales2/doc/slsadhu.pdf> accessed on 06 April 2019.

¹⁸Ranjit Hoskote, I, *Lalla, The Poems of LalDed*, Penguin Classics, India, 2011, p- xvi.

¹⁹Ibid, p-xxiv.

memory of the Kashmir valley.²⁰ *Lalded* thus became an icon of motherhood though she gave birth to none. The popularization of the notion of Kashmiryat or composite culture of Kashmir is attributed to her. Mother Lal as the icon of *Kashmiriyat* attained a political significance. Describing *Lalded*, Nyla Ali Khan writes ‘she chose to break the mold of patriarchy in a stiflingly traditional society by not allowing her intellectual and spiritual freedoms to be curbed’²¹. Thus, the maternal sentiment in the image of the mother, Lala is of an activist aiming to transform the community.

Tracing the history of the outbreak of the Freedom Struggle in Kashmir, G.H. Khan (1980), in his book *Freedom Movement in Kashmir* has noted that the gun makers of Srinagar offered stiff resistance when Gulab Singh sent troops under Wazir Lakhpat²² to take over the charge of the Kashmir valley from the then-Governor, Sheikh Imam-ud-din who had already declared his independence. In the encounter the Sheikh defeated the Dogra forces with the popular support. In the victory, an important role was played by the wife of Sheikh Imam-ud-din. Her subjects conferred on her the title *Madar-i-Meherban* (Kind-Mother) who took up arms and took the vow not to allow the Sheikh to enter her chambers until he repulsed the invaders. With the help of British Soldiers, the people’s resistance was however, crushed²³. Thus, the maternal sentiment in the moments of conflicts and social changes has been central in the region of Kashmir.

Women in the politics of resistance: A background

The valley of Kashmir has been described as the most militarized corner of the world. As per the report, *Structures of Violence*, by the Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Societies (JKCCS 2015), the estimated numbers of soldiers, the paramilitary and the police, deployed in Kashmir were between 6.5 lakh²⁴ to 7.5 lakh.²⁵ In August 2019, after reorganization of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) State as two Union territories, namely J&K and Ladakh, the estimate went up to around 8.5- 9 Lakh Soldiers as per official records²⁶. The roots of the present situation can be traced from the development that followed, after the partition of India. In August 1947, Pakistan and India became independent States in accordance with a scheme of partition provided by the Indian Independence Act 1947. The State of Jammu and Kashmir, having Muslims in the majority, was supposed to accede to Pakistan. However, as James D. Hawley (1991) has ascertained, the Maharaja of Kashmir, accessed the State to India on 26 October 1947 against the wishes of the people of Kashmir. Many historians have questioned the validity of the instrument

²⁰Chitralkha Zutshi, *Languages of Belonging: Islam, regional Identity, and The Making of Kashmir*, Permanent Black, 2011, p. 21.

²¹ Nyla Ali Khan, The land of Lalla-ded: Politicization of Kashmir and construction of the Kashmiri Women, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, Vol. 9 Issue 1, September 2007.

²² When Maharaja Gulab Singh (the Dogra Ruler) began to expand his state, he first conquered Bhandarwah where one minister, Wazir Lakhpat, rebelled against his ruler and collaborated with Gulab Singh for support.

²³ Khan G.H, *Freedom Movement in Kashmir 1931-1940*; Light and Life Publications, New Delhi, Jammu, Trivandrum, 1980, pp.78

²⁴ A unit in the Indian numbering system.

²⁵*Structures of Violence - The Indian State in Jammu and Kashmir*, International People's Tribunal on Human Rights and Justice in Indian Administered Kashmir (IPTK)& Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), 2015, p-11-16.

²⁶ Vikram Sharma, Forces deploy 1 million to guard Kashmir Valley, *THE ASIAN AGE*, VIKRAM SHARMA, Aug 18, 2019 <https://www.asianage.com/india/all-india/180819/forces-deploy-1-million-to-guard-kashmir-valley.html>

of accession which they believe was manipulated by the Indian Government²⁷. The Kashmir issue was brought to the Security Council by India on 1 January 1948. The Security Council adopted a resolution on 21 April 1948, which provided for a plebiscite in Jammu and Kashmir, to determine the future status of the State²⁸. Since then, the plebiscite has remained a distant dream, and in 1989 the previous secessionist political struggle turned into an armed rebellion. In the post-independence period, the major act that has governed military action in Jammu and Kashmir is the Armed forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 (as Amended in 1972). Even a non-commissioned officer can order his men to shoot to kill if he thinks that it is necessary to do so for maintenance of public order. The Act permits arrest without warrants with whatever force may be necessary, against any person against whom suspicion exists²⁹. Under these circumstances, women have seen the deaths of their loved ones, and, frequently, the bread-earner in the family, either a father or a spouse. Every death in the family leads to the destruction of the family, as a viable socio-economic unit, creating an ambiguous space for women's assertion. At the same time, militarization, as Cynthia Enloe looks at it, is a process that happens at so many levels. It happens at the individual level when a woman who has a son is persuaded that she can be a good mother if she allows the military recruiter to recruit her son so her son will get off the couch³⁰. According to Cynthia Enloe, there is an increasing diffusion of military ideas into popular culture and into social workings³¹. Recent feminist scholarship on Kashmir has observed that the Secessionist Movement uses the culturally dominant symbols of maternal sentiments for its sustenance, and therefore, bestow them with the title of 'Mothers of the Martyrs'³². In the 1990s when the resurgence of violence began with the birth of militant organizations like JKLF (Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front), the demonstrations and protests deployed slogans such as:

'shaheed ki jo mauthai wo quamkihayathai'
(He who dies a martyr, gives life to the nation).

While glorifying the mothers of martyrs, and in turn the martyrdom in itself, the JKLF handed out the *Shaheed Maqbool Butt Award* to the mothers of those young boys who were killed in the Amarnath Shrine Board agitation, in Srinagar in 2008. These mothers reiterated that they would meet them again in heaven³³. Women took to the streets in large numbers, walking alongside their men, raising pro-Kashmiri independence slogans, in the six months long 2016 unrest which started when the security forces killed Hizbul Mujahidin Commander BurhanWani, known as the poster boy of new militancy in Kashmir. Women sang obituaries for his death and told stories—folklore—which conveyed the tragedy of his death and betrayal amidst strict curfews and an

²⁷See for example, Howley James D., *Alive and Kicking: The Kashmir Dispute Forty years Later*, *Penn State International Law Review*, *Dickinson Journal of International Law* Vol. 9 No.1 1991

²⁸Cited from *Ibid* p. 30.

²⁹Bhasin Anuradha Jamwal, *Women in Kashmir Conflict: Victimhood and Beyond*, IN, Shree Mulay and Jackie Kirk (ed.), *Women Building Peace Between India and Pakistan*, Anthem Press India, 2007, p.173

³⁰Schouten, P. & Dunham, H. (2012) 'Theory Talk #48: Cynthia Enloe on Militarization, Feminism, and the International Politics of Banana Boats', *Theory Talks*, <http://www.theorytalks.org/2012/05/theory-talk-48.html> (22-05-2012).

³¹*Ibid*.

³² See for example, Parashar Swati, *Gender, Jihad, and Jingoism: Women as Perpetrators, Planners, and Patrons of Militancy in Kashmir*, *Studies in Conflict Terrorism*, *Volume: 34, Issue: 4*, TAYLOR & FRANCIS, 2011, p.310.

³³Parashar Swati, *Gender, Jihad, and Jingoism: Women as Perpetrators, Planners, and Patrons of Militancy in Kashmir: Studies in Conflict Terrorism*, *Volume: 34 Issue:4*, TAYLOR & FRANCIS, 2011, p.310.

internet blockade³⁴. The pain and agony of *Akanandun*'s mother; her negotiations to never let go of her son; and *Lalded*'s zest to help the community rise from the repression as a collective motherhood for Burhan Wani, all reconstitute motherhood that is politically informed and emotionally stable.

Motherhood and the political subjectivity of women: examining the discourse of mothers

Very often when I go to participate or attend conferences/seminars in mainland India, when people learn I am from Kashmir, they often ask me questions regarding Kashmiri mothers. In one such conference held in 2010 at Aligarh Muslim University, a participant asked me 'Is there any role of mothers in raising the boys who grow up to be militants and stone pelters in Kashmir?' I had no data to support an answer to this query; however, I referred to an old interview of a female separatist, Asiya Indrabi, who had desired her sons should follow the footsteps of Osama-bin Laden and Mullah Omer as their role models (it turned though they grew up to become engineers). To this day I am struggling to find the right answer. Later in an event, one woman, while listening a short speech by Shah Faesal³⁵ in a storytelling workshop held at Jammu, expressed "how I wished the sons in Kashmir were raised like you, it is the fault of us as mothers." That was the moment I decided to interrogate this problem. Her opinion came at a time when Indian mainstream media delivered multiple debates on the growing Islamic radicalism in Kashmir and Kashmiri Muslim women came to be seen as victims of it. Irene Oh, in an article, *The Performativity of Motherhood* (2009) rightly points out that in today's tense religious and political environment, in which Islam and Muslims are too easily simplified and objectified, to insist upon the complexities of identity and the shared hopes of mothers seems but a small gesture toward the understanding necessary for a just peace³⁶. In the following section, I aim to locate this complexity by examining the present discourses on Kashmiri motherhood through funeral speeches, performance of funeral rites and narratives of the mothers of militants and attempts to challenge the dominant notion of victimhood of Kashmiri Muslim mothers.

Examining the narratives of mothers in Funerals

Naseema

One is awestruck to see Naseema alongside the dead body of her son, delivering a powerful speech in front of a huge gathering of thousands of people. Naseema began with a public apology: "*Please listen my dear villagers, I seek your forgiveness if my son has caused any inconvenience to any of the villager.*" She says this repeatedly insisting that she won't take the dead body for final rites if anyone has any grudge against him. People wailing all along gave her reaffirmations that her son had achieved martyrdom, a status Muslims perceive as the highest reward from Allah. She continues to say, almost with a grudge, "*When my husband got killed, I and my children were left alone, and I raised my children with my blood. Today he is gone, and I*

³⁴Malik Inshah, Gendered Politics of Funerary Processions; Contesting Indian Sovereignty in Kashmir, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Women and Kashmir special Issue, Vol II no. 4, Dec. 2018.

³⁵Shah Faesal is a politician and former Indian Bureaucrat from Kashmir. In 2009 he became the first Kashmiri to top the Indian civil services examination. Soon after joining the civil services he was projected by the state as role model for the youth in Kashmir.

³⁶Irene Oh, The Performativity of Motherhood: Embodying Theology and Political Agency: *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2009

wish he becomes a reason for all of us to enter the heavens. Please oh People, be witness to his martyrdom”.

Saleema

Another video that triggered a debate around the symbolism of motherhood being manipulated by the militant outfits on religious lines was of a woman who pulled the rifle of her son's militant friend who was attending his funeral and shot a bullet into the air (a gun salute). She did not say anything; she first kissed the foreheads of the militant friends of her son claiming thereby her right of mothering to them after her son was no more.

There is no doubt that the death of a son is a matter of immense grief to the mother, the family and community members. Funerals are supposed to be a site for expression of shared grief and pain. Traditionally women are expected to throw themselves into the grief by expressing their pain with tears and crying loudly. However, in the above cases, the funerals become political expressions for both the mothers and community members. In the case of Saleema, the gun salute by a mother was the first of its kind, but the public appeal was similar to Naseema's speech. Both rejected tears and tried to legitimize the action of their sons by openly supporting their ideology. They looked powerful and empowered during the short period (funeral) of life-long pain. Their martyrdom is thus constructed around maternal sacrifice and the intense sentiment of mothering in a charged political atmosphere.

Examining the discourses on motherhood through personal narratives

Naseema

I met Naseema (the mother in first funeral video—see footnote 3) at her home in Kulgam. She lost her husband in the 1990's while he was crossing the Line of Control. In their ten years of marriage she bore him five children and never thought she would have to raise them as a single mother. She never received the dead body of her husband and continued to nurture her children with love and the little resources she had. After almost 25 years, her son, who was an active militant, was killed in an encounter in a nearby village. Naseema couldn't see the face of her dead son, because he was mutilated after being killed and most of his body parts were burnt.

Watching her video prompted me to meet her, to see how one makes sense of motherhood in such a politically charged atmosphere. As soon I turned on my recorder, Naseema spoke non-stop, just the way she spoke at the funeral. I was shocked: I expected her to break down, to say 'I miss my son, his life was more important than his martyrdom'. She said nothing of the sort. She took pride in her son's identity as militant. Contrary to the belief that mothers of martyrs are guaranteed a place in heaven, she said, *'while both my husband and son have achieved martyrdom, it does not guarantee my place in the heavens. Allah will judge me by my own virtues'*. Justifying his act, she argued her son was interrogated several times in jail, his torture leaving him emasculated and therefore unable to be married. According to Naseema, her son was arrested in 2005 and jailed for more than a year. After his release, she sent him to Srinagar to do masonry work, which he agreed to even though she had made efforts to give him a decent education till graduation. His ill-fate return led to his arrest in 2008, again in Srinagar. It was difficult for the illiterate mother to discover the location of the new jail, but she somehow managed to reach the Zadibal (Srinagar) police station with her daughter. Her son was again released a year later. In 2012 when he was to be arrested third time, her son finally joined the HizbulMujahideen group. With a broken voice she said to me during our interview: *'how would I give my son? I didn't. No mother will ever! But I know he had nothing left in life, torture had left him emasculated, he was not allowed to work peacefully and wherever he went they followed him'* while sharing her grief she pointed fingers against her own community. *"Who knew my son except his own friends' relatives and neighbors? He died because someone from my own community first informed about his alleged links with militants and later revealed his location to them when he was active."* She was not ready to accept his militancy before 2012, and she justified his innocence in these words: *'they assumed my son had links with militants, because he talked to a militant or met him, but he could have been someone from his school, college, village or any relative. After all, those who join share the same blood and soil.'* She quickly added she never asked her son to return. That would be a sin. His mission was much larger than the material goals of life. She is contented that he achieved everything he aspired for. She repeatedly refused to go into grief for her son, and instead talked about his bravery and her own bravery. However, she is still not able to come to terms with the fact that her son's body was burnt. She said she was momentarily annoyed over her son's fate but then he came to her in her dreams as her newborn son, and she was more at peace realizing that he was not dead but reborn, a sign of eternity. He is preserved where he came from and where we will all return to—just the way *Akanandun*³⁷ was reborn. She said earlier she thought it was difficult to visit her son's grave, but after three months when she went to feel his presence there, she actually felt relieved and could scent a fragrance that she associated with her son. She still feels an eternal bond with him. These feelings have been that the death nurtured through the many funerals where her son has been

³⁷ As a reminder, the son of an overly protective mother in Kashmiri folklore.

honoured. She discovers contentment in peoples' reaffirmations about his martyrdom, asserting that his act was a legitimate one in the eyes of her community.

Here it is important to invoke Julie Peteet's observation that in resistance movements the willingness to die is more significant than the willingness to kill. The honour that mothers like Naseema find in the death of their sons is not that their sons killed their enemy but rather, they sacrificed their own lives. As such, political strife becomes a personal sentiment after accepting the fate of their emotional bonding with their sons through their violent deaths. Thus, the personal and intimate sphere of motherhood turns into public and political motherhood after their son's join the militancy or are killed for being a militant. While they bury the bodies of sons, they adopt their political ideologies more intimately. The discursive analysis provides more explanation of thesis I propose: the intimate becomes political, and the political becomes intimate.

But this is not the only way this mother keeps her motherhood alive. She has two more sons. One of her sons who is married has been taken to different camps and police stations for questioning several times, his only fault being that his brother was a militant. Pointing out that this son of hers is physically weak, compared to her dead militant son, she vows to protect him. In our interview, she asked me

'Why don't you write about this injustice? When my son, who they think did wrong, has been eliminated, why are they not sparing us now? My other sons are working hard to make both ends meet but they are always mistrusted and put under surveillance'.

Naseema has just arranged the marriage of her youngest son who is still in his early 20s. She explains her reasoning, stating, *"what if he is picked up by the army and returns as a man unable to produce offspring?"* During all our conversations, Naseema managed to work on house repairs. I tried to engage myself with her grief and her courage, the two, which in practice were inseparable within her.

Sajida

Another woman I interviewed, Sajida (pseudonym) lives just three miles away from Naseema's home. Sajida's son joined the militancy when he was only in the 10th standard. Sajida, unlike Naseema, is not very vocal nor articulate, but she shared with me the same sense of courage in the death of her son that is being honoured. While I was with her at her home, Sajida's other son was taken to the camp for questioning. I asked her, whom she would approach for his release? She said no one. She said she goes to meet her son and never expects the authorities to help her. Her son's pictures holding a Kalashankov are displayed on the decorative wall *Almirah* (wall shelves) in the guest room. Sajida becomes serious while talking and then suddenly smiles as her eyes fall on the picture of her son. I asked her if her son had sought her permission when he left to join militancy. She smiled and said he didn't. She remembers though, speaking to him about it when they met after he took up a gun. Her son, she said, had told her that *"as a mother you would have never allowed me, and I had made my decision."* Then she quickly adds, *"I had three sons, he was the son for my Akhirah (life hereafter), and the other ones take care of my worldly matters'.* She had told her son she would have allowed him to go, had he spoken about it. I did not question her, whether she could have done that in reality. However, in her broken voice she said he died a respectable death and has secured his place in

heaven. Although deep down there is nothing that soothes her as a mother, her separation from her son is bearable because of “divine intervention” but she notes that the agonies build up every day. What keeps her going in life is her concern for her son who lives with her. But even with him she is not free from anxiety: the authorities conduct arrest sprees, day in and day out, not allowing these women to stabilize their motherhood.

Discursive analysis of the emotions of mothering

The above two narratives bring out the pain and agony that accompanies the loss of dead sons. In this section I outline four discursive features of the emotions of mothering. Mothering is an intimate feeling and is typically a private sphere for women. However, as the funeral speeches and the narratives of these mothers depict, these women’s experiences collide with political realities associated with the secessionist movement in Kashmir. While their maternal sentiments are emotional, to legitimize the violent death of a son, the mothers express this emotional sentiment cautiously, but politically. Thus, and this is my first point, they own what is political in their intimate world. The legitimacy of what is political around the death of their sons comes from religion and in this case from Islam. Although the political movement may not be a religious movement, the practices and principles followed to achieve the political goals are associated with their particular religion. Both religion and politics are external factors in constructing the performance of mothering in Kashmir. They are external but become intimate and personal.

It is obvious from the narratives that the families of militants suffer intimidation by the security forces even after the suspected militants have been eliminated. Therefore, the second discursive domain of the emotions of mothering pertains to their internalization of the sentiment of ‘the political’, which is a process of empowered motherhood. They are empowered in the sense that they negotiate with powerful armed forces to protect their children and their own motherhood, a motherhood that is tested day in and day out, while their other family members undergo intimidation. Inshah Malik points out that the experience of victimization among women encourages women to take control and direct their lives into struggles for change. In this process of change, women are themselves significantly agential rather than mere recipients of the actions of others³⁸. Again, in protecting their intimate private sphere of mothering, they find a way to balance their motherhood, moving between being protective for their surviving sons and being connected to eternity for their dead sons.

Thirdly, the kind of language the mothers use while referring to the activities of their militant relatives indicates a conscious use of militant and agentive lexicon. While referring to the activities of the men who are/were active militants, they referred to the idea of ‘the field’ very often. In order to infer the period when a person was an active militant, they would say ‘he was active in the field’ thereby operationalising the militancy in the same sense a social activist or a feminist activist might refer to the “operationalisation” of theory. The use of this idea of “the field” indicates that these mothers held conversations with their sons regarding their activities and offers a legitimization while they were still alive.

Fourthly, mothers emphasize, overwhelmingly, the harassment they and their families experienced at the hands of armed forces and other state agencies in control, prior to their son’s involvement. The mothers repeatedly voiced this fact, perhaps remorsefully because that is what

³⁸ Malik Inshah. *Muslim Women, Agency and Resistance Politics: The Case of Kashmir*, Palgrave Pivot India, 2019 p. 4.

they believe motivated their sons to join the militant ranks. This is significant because it is a discursive effort to legitimize their sons' activities after their sons' deaths.

One of the main questions that this article sought to answer was whether Kashmiri mothers hold any power or role in restraining or allowing their sons to join the militancy. Before Naseema's son joined the militant ranks, she made all efforts to keep him away from it even after the arrest sprees. At one point she sent him to Srinagar to take on masonry work, as mentioned above. This clearly indicates that she had no willful intention of sending her son to join the ranks of the militants. Thus, she was not charged by any religious or political sentiment before he joined the militancy. Though she repeatedly says she never asked him to return. In Sajida's case too, the son left his home to become a militant without informing any family member. Sajida's had even told her son once that she would have never permitted him to go, and that she would have made it difficult for him to do so. However, like Naseema, she proudly makes it clear that she never asked him to come back once he made the decision to leave. Their mothering in the intimate sphere is disrupted by the outside political disturbances and not by their own social values and morals. However, once the sons joined, mothers developed a political rationale for their sons' behaviors.

The Political as the Intimate and the Intimate as the political

I do not wish to romanticize Kashmiri motherhood, but it needs to be recognized that their motherhood has a specific political and cultural context that shapes their 'performativity'³⁹ on daily basis. Borrowing Zeina Taari's thesis, I argue that Kashmiri Muslim mothers, as with many mothers who live in patriarchal cultures, tend to identify the oppression that they experience more with structural features (militarization in this case) endemic to their societies, rather than with their religious practice or with the men directly in their lives⁴⁰. Tracing the cultural significance of motherhood in the iconography of Kashmir leads to an understanding of motherhood idealized in daily lives of the community. As mothers they also reveal a political consciousness in their performativity' and thus they strategically select the choices they make for the survival of their remaining children. Emphasizing the harassment at the hands of security forces and police that has been inflicted on their families on a daily basis, these mothers are not valorizing death; instead, they are seeking preservation of life. The honor associated with the death of their sons (martyrdom), helps them to achieve what anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes has described as "letting go" of the dead ones⁴¹. Kashmiri women's reconfigured maternal practices are of political significance for two interconnected reasons. First, mothers are making their grief public on the world stage, asserting that Kashmir needs their attention; and second, they serve to break down gender dichotomies through political discourse in the public realm to serve their larger political goals. Kashmiri mother's performativity should be understood within the complexities of ongoing death and destruction and a hope of peace. For Kashmiri mothers, violence and conflict have had a severely tragic impact on them, consciously becoming part of larger political goals. While letting go of their sons—their intimate understanding and acceptance of their sons' actions for the political cause of Kashmiri freedom—the intimate becomes political and the political becomes intimate.

³⁹As used by Ellen Ross and Saba Mehmood.

⁴⁰Zeina Zaatari, *The Culture of Motherhood*: 2006, p-35

⁴¹Cited from, Julie Peteet, *Mothering in the Danger Zone*, In, S. Therese, A. Karolyn and H. Judith (ed.), *Gender, Politics and Islam*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2002, p.157.