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Mothers as the middle-ground between the Mountain and the State

By Hasret Cetinkaya¹

Abstract

This paper analyses how the 'Peace Mothers' in Turkey and Northern Kurdistan are structurally located in the middle-ground between familial relations and the state, as they strive to come to terms with their children's interpretation of the politics of decolonisation through the project of Kurdish democratisation and 'revolution'. Such a politics takes its dominant form in the vehicle of The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a movement who see themselves as a decolonial and left-wing militant group, and whose membership is both young and committed to radical political transformation. At stake for the mothers of these members who have become an increasingly visible political actor in the Turkish public sphere, is a struggle with their children's interpretation of possible futures, as well as being the middle-ground and the direct site of confrontation against the state. In contemporary Turkey, the 'Peace Mothers' are taking to the street, as their children are either in prison, guerrilla fighters, or as seen in 2019, on hunger strike. The children's engagement with the state is hidden, compared to the struggle of the 'Peace Mothers'. The 'Mothers' as such, are seen as confrontational, violent (symbolically), and as the so-called "producers of terrorists".

The 'Mothers', as (de)sexed identities, are transgressing norms of propriety, something welcomed within the revolutionary spirit of the Kurdish movement, which places women in the forefront of their decolonial struggle against the state, capitalism and slavery. The 'Peace Mothers' are a powerful antidote to the state, as voices of the demand for equal rights, as well as resisting the precarity of their existence as Kurds. The 'Peace Mothers' are constantly reminded of being 'women' through the sexual harassment and violence they are met with. Their bodies, therefore, become a site of resistance and domination. Drawing upon recent events with the so-called 'Peace Mothers' of Turkey, the hunger strikes and the centering of the embodied figures of the 'Mother-goddess' at the front of Kurdish decolonial struggle, this paper draws upon new data gathered through ethnographic fieldwork in Turkey and interviews with the 'Peace Mothers'.

Introduction

Our children were not in love with guns, our children were in love with a life of freedom'.

These were the words offered by a 'Peace Mother', whose soft face was carrying the burden of human misery, and yet still had the strength to hope and resist. Her son had been away from his home and ordinary life for more than a decade, fighting in the struggle for rights and justice for Kurds in Turkey. For this particular mother's son, as well as the other children of the so-called

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'Peace Mothers', as liberal democratic politics within the post-Kemalist² state offered no possibility of justice, '[...] *the solution becomes the mountains* [sic]'.³

This article poses the question: What does it mean to be politically located in the middle-ground between the state and one's child? That is to ask, what does it mean to occupy the view of a 'Peace Mother' and her experiences as she finds herself an unlikely and partial participant in a militant decolonial political project, whilst simultaneously, participating in a social movement which argues for peace in the midst of an armed conflict, and the augmentation of the state's practice? These 'Peace Mothers', who engage in protest, civil disobedience and now semi-ritualised confrontations with the state, demand an end to the war against their children, stake their claim in broadly liberal democratic terms, whilst paradoxically experiencing their identities as incompatible with normative personhood of recognized subjects in Turkey. As a result, the 'Peace Mothers' find themselves constantly in the dialectic between visibility and invisibility within the public sphere, struggling, as Jacqueline Rose (2018, p. 51) describes, to spread the 'milk of human kindness and stop the spillage of war'.

But who are the 'Peace Mothers'? The figure of the 'Peace Mother' is best explained in light of the armed conflict between the Turkish state and The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), where the name 'Peace Mother' refers to a Kurdish mother with a child who has either joined the PKK or is a political dissident and considered sympathizers and/or promoters of the PKK discourse.⁴ Consequently, these 'Mothers' find themselves representing a mother-like role for the Kurdish movement, as well as having children, actually fighting against the very same state to which they appeal to for peace, justice and the equality of grievability afforded to their Turkish counterparts. The 'Peace Mothers', thus stand for the collective grieving of Kurdish precarity, and their role during this long low intensity war, which has always been gendered, has placed them in a position where they can articulate demands for peace. Such a possibility is made all the more conceivable, since motherhood and peace are seen culturally to go hand in hand (Åhäll, 2015, p. 17). As such, the 'Peace Mothers' are making demands to end the racially determined suffering of Kurds through their own mourning over the loss of their children, either through death or by them leaving for the 'mountain'.⁵ As one 'Mother' expressed to me: '*you kind of know what's going to happen to them*', when they leave home.

This state of public grieving is the expression of the constant anticipation of news about their children's death that the 'Peace Mothers' live in, and yet, these children are considered already-dead from the time they have left home. Within the discourse of the 'Mothers', their children have crossed the threshold from ordinary human life to a god-like existence, in which they are represented as already symbolically dead. As such, for the Kurds, the voice of the

² My analysis of the Kemalist legacy of the Turkish state is drawn from Betül Çelik (2000). In short, the social imaginary of 'Kemalism' is still operative in the territorial state of Turkey, though reworked in various ways by subsequent ideological projects. What they all share, is an ethical conception of community which constitutes itself through the positing of a 'constitutive outside', represented in large part by the figure of 'the Kurd'.

³ By way of protecting the security of those women I have interviewed, I will not provide further details of the interviews. Where I am drawing upon the narratives and words of the 'Peace Mothers' I interviewed whilst conducting ethnographic research on *Namus* ("honour") and gender propriety among the Kurds, I shall place those quotes in italics.

⁴ I refer throughout the article to the 'figure' of the 'Peace Mother', as biological motherhood is not a prerequisite for being counted as a 'Peace Mother'. The figure of the 'Peace Mother' refers also to women committed to the movement, who assume the role of a Mother to that movement and its younger participants. For a more detailed account of this duality of meaning see Göksel (2018).

⁵ The 'mountain' stands here as referral to the place where the PKK operates, without it being further specified in everyday discourse.

‘Mothers’ is also a voice that speaks of that which is god-like. Having left the home and the love of their mothers, these PKK members have also abandoned their human desires for a greater cause, namely the Kurdish question and political freedom.⁶ The death of these ‘children’ punctuates the normalisation of conflict and violence, a historical process into which they were born, and forged their lives and desires. Their death is productive, motivational, and their bodies a sacrifice that becomes part of decolonial storytelling (Fanon, 2001 [1965], p. 91). Whilst the children of the ‘Peace Mothers’ are engaging in what can be classified as thanato-politics (a politics of death, suicide and martyrdom) of sorts which serves to interrupt and subvert the biopolitical logic of the state (Murray, 2008, p. 205), the claims of their mothers are political claims for the radical equality of all and the ability to grieve for all lives.

The project of the ‘Peace Mothers’ is a social movement with the aim of raising awareness of the injustices and state of lawlessness against Kurds. Theirs is a voice directed in the first instance to the Turkish state, and secondly to the international community’s negation of their pain. The ‘Mothers’ demands, however, are not taken seriously by the state, and, yet they are paradoxically subjected to state violence. What is more, the ‘Mothers’ stand as an ever-present reminder that the Kurdish question’s most radical expression, the PKK, is not confined to the mountains or prisons, but persisting and alive through the voice and performative assembly of the ‘Peace Mothers’.

The bodies of ‘Peace Mothers’ as female bodies, and the political question of ‘natality’ are bound up here, as the ‘Mothers’ are both the procreators of ‘the people’ and the nation, as well as those political subjects who are ‘able to perform what is [taken to be] infinitely improbable’, namely a new beginning which reshapes the world (Arendt, 1998 [1958], pp. 177-178). The visibility and presence of the ‘Mothers’ and their demand for peace serves not only as a way to speak of their children, but more importantly to speak of them as alive, as lives that count despite the fact that their children are rendered dead by the state discourse.

Through their maternal role, ‘Peace Mothers’ constitute a civic movement similar to that of the *Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo* – a group of ‘Mothers’ who started gathering in 1977 at Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, Argentina, to campaign and demand knowledge about the whereabouts of their disappeared children, who they had lost in the “Dirty War” (1976-1983). The Kurdish ‘Mothers’, like the ‘Mothers’ of Plaza de Mayo, perform what Diana Taylor refers to as a ‘theatrical spectacle’ of motherhood, where maternity and mourning are portrayed as inseparable in the claim staged for the end to violence (Taylor, 1997, p. 193).

This article shall proceed by theoretical and contextualised analysis of the ‘Peace Mother’s’ protests and through interviews I conducted with them in Spring and Summer of 2019, a period characterised by political uncertainty, as national elections were taking place in March 2019. During this time, many members of the broader Kurdish movement, which extends far beyond the PKK were on hunger strike, demanding the isolation of the symbolic and founding leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, to be lifted. Resistance and the challenges for survival were actual and visible.

To be Kurdish is to be part of a racialised people, rendered ‘Other’ to the good Turkish citizen, and, as such, the anti-colonial struggle at stake for the ‘Mothers’ is not limited to the period following the establishment of the organisation of the ‘Peace Mothers’ movement in 1996. Rather,

⁶ ‘The Kurdish Question’ is a term used widely to refer to the subaltern and yet irrepressible condition of Kurds. As such the question is one addressed to the Turkish (post) Kemalist state and includes demands for the resolution of the lack of political representation, the denial of any cultural identity and the recognition of Kurds as full citizens of the Republic.

this struggle against a politics of *'de facto'* colonisation' (Gambetti and Jongerden, 2015, p. 3; Öcalan, 2013, p. 40) is a matter of the past, present and future. Decolonial struggle is an attempt to re-tell the past and open up co-existing temporalities which will '[...] recognise the 'other' as always and already present in history and participating in its production, but written out of it [...]' (Bhambra, 2007, p. 11). The 'in media res' which the 'Mothers' find themselves located in, is a multi-temporal struggle, where they and their children are offering an account of another historicity involving more than a single temporality: a temporality and bio-politics, which can ensure that the conditions for life can be refigured, and justice for the Kurds and human kind can be rendered thinkable.

To fully grasp the centrality and feminist practice of these 'Mothers' in a historical context, the backdrop to the conflict will be discussed briefly as this will elucidate the conditions of emergence of the 'Peace Mothers' and their relation to the analysis of the figure of the 'Woman' found in Abdullah Öcalan's philosophical writings. Finally, this article argues that motherhood, which is considered sacred in both Kurdish, Turkish and Islamic discourses (Peteet, 1997, p. 106), changes character when it is expressed through the practices of a 'Peace Mother'. Such an improper motherhood not only elevates the protection given to mothers in the traditional sense, but also exposes them in different ways to gendered harassment and sexual abuse by the forces of the state. They live in an atmosphere of 'doom' (Fanon, 2001, p. 64) uncertain about life, one's children and the constant harassment they experience from the state. One 'Peace Mother' expressed their situation, to me, as one of enslavement or captivity, simply because of their attempt to *'defend humans'*. Whilst resisting the oppression of the colonisers, the 'Mothers' are also challenging the traditional role confined to the figure of Motherhood in Turkey, a role which is to raise proper citizens with primary loyalty to Turkey and 'Turkishness' (Karaman, 2016; Sirman, 1989).

A 'decolonial' movement?

Before beginning my analysis proper, I want to take pause and reflect on what is at stake in naming the Kurdish movement a 'decolonial' movement. The exact nature of the Kurdish movements political project has itself been a site of contestation and political dispute, both within the movement, in Turkish political discourse more widely, as well in as the academic discourse on the matter. All of these discourses have sought to interpret, categorise and contain the politics of the movement. The Kurdish movement consists of several actors, the most visible being the PKK, who have been portrayed through discourses of national liberation, as a civil rights movement, a guerrilla-armed organisation or as terrorist and separatist organisation. Joost Jongerden (2016, p. 99) notes, however, that the self-understanding of the movement is 'as a youth movement and as a women's movement'. As Öcalan's political writings attest (2018), this self-understanding is committed to a politics which breaks with the onto-epistemological frame of the Turkish State and its ideology, seeking a new understanding of democratic and ecological politics organised around the figure of 'Woman' as a decolonial political agent.

Following the capture and imprisonment of Öcalan in 1999, the PKK underwent a discursive renewal, based upon the principles 'democracy beyond the nation state', ecologism, as well as autonomy. Such a shift in PKK discourse, has not only been affected at the level of the textual, but has been implemented, explored and experimented with throughout the Kurdish movement overall (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2011, p. 152). Central to this reimagining of Kurdish politics is the role of 'Women' and 'Mothers'.

Öcalan (2013) sketches the relationship between the subordination of women, the figure of

“Woman” and the rise of ‘mainstream civilisation’ whose 5000 years history, is equally the history of the enslavement of humanity, the Kurds and “Woman”. In the figure of the “Woman”, Öcalan condenses into a single name all which is natural, organic, and egalitarian; positing a ‘balanced life’ between humans and nature, which is in harmony and primordial to the emergence of “civilisation” and, thus, slavery (Öcalan, 2013, p. 30). Öcalan’s fundamental claim is that ‘mainstream civilisation’, commences with the enslavement of “Woman”, through what he calls ‘housewifisation’ (2013, p. 28). As such, it is only through a ‘struggle against the foundations of this ruling system’ (Öcalan, 2013, p. 11), that not only women, but also men can achieve freedom, and slavery can be destroyed. Any liberation of life, for Öcalan, can only be achieved through a Woman’s revolution: ‘If I am to be a freedom fighter, I cannot just ignore this: woman’s revolution is a revolution within a revolution’ (2013, p. 61).

Öcalan refers to an abstract idea of a ‘natural existence of Woman’ to provide a critical viewpoint on modernity; to such an end, he conjures the myths of Mesopotamia, the place of his childhood, the homeland of the Kurds, and the imaginary of a primordial Neolithic era. The Neolithic era stands for Öcalan as the heyday of matricentric social order. Such a matricentric order is projected as prior to the emergence of statist forms which are equated, in Öcalan’s account, with the development of sovereignty and the idea of power of the father. A metaphysical authority, Öcalan ascribes to the ‘Mother goddess’ a mythical role as the ‘principal life element that both gives birth and sustains life through nurturing, even under the most difficult conditions.’ She forms the basis of the ‘social being’ and thus provides the condition of possibility for the human in and of itself (Öcalan, 2013, p. 16).

‘Woman’s true freedom’, he writes, ‘is only possible if the enslaving emotions, needs and desires of husband, father, lover, brother, friend and son can all be removed’. As we can see, an ongoing negotiation of the colonial present, which produces a number of tensions emerges as Öcalan measures such freedoms, not against a ‘modern’ or post-modern horizon, but against ‘civilisation’. At stake then, is a politics of time, in which the Kurds are posited as enslaved within ‘civilisation’, yet of a somewhat time-less character, with the capacity to disrupt and reconfigure such temporalities, through the invocation of a mythical and spatial reorganisation of time itself. Öcalan thus brings in local histories and pluriversal temporalities in the struggle against the modern/colonial order (Walsh and Mignolo, 2018, p. 3). Öcalan, like Arendt (1961), positions the political agent, in this case the Kurds, in a space which is simultaneously oriented towards the past, and a projected near future, in which through returning to lessons from the mythical past of Neolithic Mesopotamia, they can refashion themselves as fully human, in the present ‘civilisation’ where they are simply slaves. The ways in which Öcalan figures the ‘Woman’, serves as metaphor for the Kurdish nation-as-people (not nation-state). In short, if one manages to liberate woman, from the hegemonic ‘civilisation’ of ‘the dominant male’, one manages to liberate, not only the Kurds, but the world.

To frame the Kurdish struggle as a decolonial project implies, in part, that we approach its history as a century-long resistance to the precarious situation of Kurdish political representation and cultural identity. Through such a different articulation of the past we depart from the standard account of the secular, and always ‘sexular’ (Scott, p. 2009), Kemalist Republic and its internal enemies, a narrative which is in current articulation premised upon the logics of security and terrorism. At stake more accurately, when one speaks of the history of the Kurdish question, is a history of dehumanisation, in which the Kurds have been considered inapprehensible, as infrahuman. To be infrahuman is to not be fully human, someone portrayed as without values and portrayed in animalistic terms (Gilroy, 2014). As such, any violence and injury towards Kurdish

bodies have been excused by the political forces which have legitimised their treatment as outside of the law. This history is well captured in a brief list of the names the Kurds have been called. In the course of my interviews alone, amongst those that referred to most frequently were 'pis Kürt', meaning a dirty or filthy Kurd in Turkish, or 'kuyruklu Kürt', referring to 'a Kurd with a tail', or more commonly as 'Easterners', which in Turkish is 'doğulu'.⁷

The Kurd, within this hegemonic Turkish representation, is considered 'filthy' and 'dirty', in need of 'cleansing'. But, within that discourse, the Kurd is someone with a 'tail', so no processes of 'cleansing' can ultimately make this Kurd a human. The 'tail' refers further to a representation of the Kurds as both animals, as well an embodiment of 'the devil'. This analogy is important, because it points to how the hegemonic racist discourse about Kurds renders them as morally impure animals without ethical character, that is, as evil. In this light, the 'Peace Mothers' call for peace is somewhat ironic. In some sense, this 'devil' is seen as calling for peace, so the actor viewed as destroying 'humanity' is calling for exactly that, the respect of 'humanity' inclusively understood.

As we have traced, norms of recognition, which are always historically contingent and dependent on onto-epistemological operations of power, determine whether Kurds are to be considered human or non-human. Any practice of epistemic production which tends to centralise and favour state-centric forms of knowledge, however, denies the possibility of recognition, leaving Kurds in a state of apprehension, as people who are not recognized by 'recognizability' (Butler, 2016, pp. 3-5; Wimmer and Schiller, 2002). Consequently, the naming of the Kurdish struggle as decolonial is an improper move, but it can function to challenge our normative frameworks of thought. When something is named 'decolonial', the myth of *neutral objectivity* is challenged. This is not, however, to give over to an uncritical legitimisation of revolution, but to step back from the moment of passing political judgment, and to embrace the possibilities of understanding (Mahmood, 2005). Against this backdrop, it is worth mentioning, however, that this article is an engagement with the logics and worlds of the 'Peace Mothers', not a normative assessment of the aim or the goal of the social movement, but an acknowledgment of a political judgment being made insofar as I deliberately refer to the movement as decolonial. At stake, undeniably, in the actions and struggle of the 'Peace Mothers' is an historical instantiation of the refusal of power established by (internal) colonialism and an attempt to undo the hierarchal racialisation of identities and their attendant structures of domination.

Historical Backdrop

On 19th April 2019, a video went viral on social media and created shock waves through the Kurdish landscape.⁸ Families and 'Peace Mothers' of prisoners on hunger strike had been holding vigils for the previous ten days in front of Gebze prison in Istanbul chanting in Kurdish: "bijî berxwedana zindanan" ("long live the resistance of prisoners"). Across Turkey and the wider world, several thousand inmates were on hunger strike and a number of prisoners had lost their lives. Their demand: an end to Öcalan's solitary confinement (Aljazeera, 26 May 2019). By putting

⁷ In Turkey, Kurds are also referred to as both 'Dag Türk' or 'Mountain Turks', 'medeniyetsizler', meaning 'uncivilised', 'gerici' meaning backwards, and 'bölücü' which refers to them as separatists.

⁸ The video in question can be found here: <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/377802/gebzede-polis-saldirisina-ugrayan-anneler-cocuklarimiz-oluyor>. A press release on the treatment of the 'Mothers' can be found here: <https://www.middleeastpressreleases.com/peace-mothers-beaten-dragged-across-ground-for-holding-demos-on-hunger-strikes/>

an end to Öcalan's suffering, this strike also symbolised for Kurds the beginning of the end to their suffering. Such vigils were not welcomed by the officials, and on that day, the video that went viral showed how five 'Peace Mothers', who wanted to hold a press conference about the hunger strikes, were violently pushed away from the prison gates by a police officer. Pushing the 'Mothers' from behind, with batons against the women's backs, although they were clearly leaving the area, the police were heard shouting: 'You've got energy. Right? So, walk'. Members of the 'Peace Mothers' movement staged another protest in Kurdish-populated south-eastern province of Mardin on the 20th April. When they gathered to make a statement, the police took the placards of the 'Mothers' and used water cannons against them (Barwari, 2019). The families and 'Mothers' had been subject to harassment by the police since the beginning of the protest and continued to be for quite some time after, but the events of 19th and 20th of April left an imprint on Kurdish consciousness.

To put these scenes into context, it is worth mentioning that the treatment of the 'Mothers' is not a singular event, but is part of a long history of oppression, since Kurds have not had any political representation, and have not been recognised as a separate national group since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 (Gunes, 20, p. 259). The legacy of the Ottoman Empire of a belt of mixed populations and relative co-existence was replaced by a climate of disintegration. 'Turkishness' was now a mechanism by which unification and homogenisation of the newly established Republic was carried out (Bayir, 2013, p. 95). The Kurds were excluded from the hegemonic narrative of the nation, and yet by their exclusion they were indirectly included within the narrative, as subjects of Turkish law (Secor, 2007, p. 39).

The 1990s was characterised by a period in which the PKK insurgency intensified, and this resulted in a number of counterinsurgency operations by the Turkish state in the Kurdish populated areas. Consequently, hundreds of Kurdish villages in the mountainous regions were emptied and burned, and more than one million were forcibly evacuated (Yeğen, 2011, p. 73). The visible pain of the 1990s precipitated the formation of the 'Peace Mothers' in 1996, and they have since sought to respond to the trauma and collective pain of the Kurds and to strive for peace between their own children and the state (Göksel, 2018, p. 8; Üstündağ, 2019, p. 118). The 'Peace Mothers' task is thus concerned with keeping alive the memory of the violence of the past to prevent it from happening again in the present and the future. As such, whilst healing the trauma of Kurds, 'Mothers' have become both narrators and healers of history, enabling them to create the better future that is yet to come.

Political Motherhood

The 'Peace Mother's' demand is an ethical one of living with one another in our shared existential vulnerability, despite our differences. As such they are challenging the differential grievability of Kurdish bodies, constituting both moral and political figures of equality through gatherings, rallies, sit-down protests by which they are engaging in a struggle for both meaning and space. Their actions have been referred to as 'performative lullabies' (Karaman, 2016, p. 383), that challenge the private and public division through a public mourning (Göksel, 2018, p. 115; Üstündağ, 2019, p. 117). In the literature on what has been termed 'socially engaged mothers', mothers are described as potentially being the 'catalyst for social activism' (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 176) and as changing the dynamics in the private sphere through their public performance of gender (Taylor, 1997). What is agreed across the literature is the emphasis on the maternal figure as central to any politics of change, engaging in a redescription and refiguration of the cultural

signifiers she represents. What all of these analyses achieve, however, is by focusing on their shared motherhood, they depoliticise the nature of the claim they are making. In this case, the 'Peace Mothers' are clearly performing the maternal/mothering in making a political claim. But to focus solely on the maternal as a catalyst risks depoliticising a dissenting and political movement.

Through their social mobilisations, 'Mothers' gather despite bans and curfews, and as such they are being both precarious and persistent (Butler, 2016, p. 83). The ban on gatherings is a restriction of *who* may appear, and still the civil obedience of 'Mothers' renders explicit the limits of the law, but even when stripped of their rights, these 'Mothers' appear and act in concert and alliance. They describe their condition as an '*open prison*' – they too are just like their children in prison, they are closed in, whereas the '*open prison*' gives the illusion of being 'free', but is equally one of incapacitation, as 'Mothers' are pre-optically and panoptically perceived as improper and targeted by the law. The 'Mothers' have reported their subjection to outright physical violence, including tear gas, beatings, detentions and strip searches. In times of conflict the first experience with war arrives primarily in the household, as Nisa Göksel writes: 'the family, as a whole, together witnesses the torture, murder, and forced disappearance of parents, spouses, brothers, and sisters, or sees family members join the guerrilla' (2018, p. 3). The 'Mothers' are not only exposed to regular state violence, but violence and grief is an intimate feature of their everyday through the ways in which their children and themselves constitute the limits of human intelligibility. The children's disappearance and death is 'unmarkable' and hence unworthy, denying the 'Mothers' mourning, as their children '...cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never "were," and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly in state of deadness. Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object' (Butler, 2006, pp. 33-35).

'Peace Mothers' and Interdependency

The 'Peace Mothers' are found in this in-between of two visibly 'violent' actors, and whilst they inhabit and are inescapably embedded in the colonial world, they are an anti-dote to the omnipresent challenge to conditions of coloniality, including violence, with which they are confronted. The 'Mothers' thus see themselves as the actors spreading empathy and humanity, since the state negates the possibility to see all lives as equally liveable or grievable. 'Peace Mothers', it might be argued, stage their resistance through the rendering visible to the world their exposure to increased vulnerability under conditions of precarity. One Peace Mother expressed '*they exclude others amongst them and tell them they have no rights and access to justice in the 'welat' (the Kurdish homeland)*'. Their demand for humanity is a voice that ruptures the silence, as silence brings death (Siyasi Haber, 9 April 2016).

The dynamic in which these 'Mothers' find themselves in, is one of violence which denies agency over meaning, and through which the colonial system is kept in order. The 'Peace Mothers' are not to be conflated with the PKK as their immediate project is not the same. Members of the 'Peace Mothers' movement are advocating a number of points which fall within the discourse of the larger Kurdish movement, such as a resolution to the Kurdish question and freedom for Öcalan, indemnity for burned villages, trials for war criminals, abolishment of the guard system in Kurdish villages and the provision of education in the Kurdish language (Karaman, 2016, p. 388). And still, these 'Peace Mothers' are working within the institutional parameters of the state and democratic order, to a greater or lesser extent, unlike the PKK discourse, which perceives the state as an absolute colonial entity and no longer worthy of struggle over.

The ‘Peace Mothers’ are performing activities that ‘disrupt, transgress, intervene and insurg in, and that mobilize, propose, provoke, activate, and construct an otherwise’ (Walsh in Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 34). Their demands are addressed to the state, and yet their movement is also a ‘decolonial insurgency’ (ibid) which is both political, epistemic and existence based, as they offer another way of living in relation to others. Consequently, they are reframing violence, in order to seek ‘a new bio-political abandonment of violence’, which strives to see all lives as sustainable, liveable, and equally grievable (Çetinkaya, 2019). The ‘Peace Mother’s’ politics of non-violence is equally one of aggression, a gesture which is evident when they defiantly make marches despite curfews. In 2016, the ‘Peace Mothers’ decided to walk to Yüksekdova, a city in North Kurdistan, to break the blockade. The ‘Mothers’ were blocked by the police, so they made a sit-down protest instead (Siyasi Haber, 9 April 2016). As such, these ‘Mothers’ are giving form to aggression in the service of discursive conflict, strikes, civil disobedience, and even revolution, all which function within the service of democratic life (Çetinkaya, 2019).

The ‘Peace Mothers’ are attempting to destroy the frontiers of the colonial: established through barracks and police stations whether in entire Kurdish populated cities or neighbourhoods in Turkish dominated cities. They are not allowed to gather, so when they do, there is by now a scripted performance of the scene that unfolds:

‘they [the police] arrest so many people, every time someone is taken into custody, we have a Mother whose son is in prison. That Mother ... they nearly take her every week and take her away. And when they take someone, they take you and leave you there for a week, you are away from everyone, from the world you have no news. That Mother, she still comes (to gatherings).’

The persistent mobilisation and gathering by the ‘Mothers’, despite being met with prison time or with fines, is a claiming of rights and a rejection of the precarity which they are being placed in.

In appealing to equality, they also appeal to the unifying experiences of women with children in the battle and the pain they are experiencing, whether Kurdish or Turkish. These ‘Mothers’ are referring to the interdependency of us all, arguing that war is not needed for Turkish survival. One of the ‘Mothers’ explained this to me:

‘The colour of a mother’s eye has no difference. The feeling of a mother is the same. No mother wants to see this. Like... We are Mothers like that, we don’t want to see pain. A mother of this ‘homeland’, from Rojava to the Syrian War, the fight for a federation (autonomy). For twenty-four hours our eyes were just on corpses. Daily, ten or fifteen corpses would come from Rojava, like we... We saw corpses with heads cut off, no legs, if you’re a mother how can you survive or tolerate this? Your generation and all the blood spilling... Let me tell you. If you say you’re a human in this ‘welat’ (homeland) and you say you sleep one night without fear. You can’t! What would it be like that [fear]? That fear is whether your children have been captured or become martyrs, or will the police come and get me, my children, will they conduct a raid, we are always in this fear. It is difficult!’

The emphasis on a shared experience of being a mother or having a mother functions also as the basis of establishing solidarity between the Kurdish ‘Mother’ and the state’s soldiers. In another interview a ‘Mother’ referred to an encounter with a Turkish soldier, and she kept appealing to

how we are all entangled and entwined with one another, vulnerable to destruction by the other, and in need of protection and mutual recognition.

'We went to Ankara, I don't remember the year, but it must have been more than ten years ago. We went to Ankara, and they didn't give us a tent there. We built something with some plastic, and for three days and three nights the rain never stopped. We stayed inside that plastic, and they'd didn't meet any of our demands, and they didn't permit us to stay. One day they came and said: you're going, you're leaving this place. They came, [and] the Mothers with their white scarf gave it to them, as a gift. We gave it as a gift. They didn't accept any of our demands. We were planning to go to the parliament door, but they didn't allow that, they turned us away, they didn't let us go anywhere. Three days went by like that, so we then dissolved and went to our homes. Everyone went to their own city, but there was an interesting side to it. A soldier was home for holidays and the military duty was for two years then, and he came to see us. Our tent had a sign with "Peace Mothers" on it, he came... he brought five packs of tea and two packs of sugar, and said: "I'm a soldier in Sirnak, I'm on holiday, I know the pain of those Mothers, I'm a soldier there. Your people are suffering a lot, they are exposed to injustice, I know you". He came to visit us. Like, maybe... those at the top don't understand us, but they should work there too... they buy themselves more apartments, more luxurious cars, they get high salaries. Everyone there have such a difficult time, so they use it to get more money [from the state]. Every soldier is not like that, that's what I got out of that soldier visiting us.'

The headscarf referred to here has great symbolic meaning to the 'Mothers'. The 'Mothers' proudly told me how in the past, when a conflict broke out, they would throw their scarf into the middle of the fight so that the skirmish would come to an end. In a parallel to throwing in the towel at a boxing match, this white scarf on the ground means 'stop!' The symbolic force of the scarf signifies how the bodies of the 'Mothers', on the ground and with all their bodily needs, symbolise, sometimes silently, a performative demand for an end to war and the beginning of a future of co-existence and interdependency. As such the scarf appears as a 'gesture of peace' (Göksel, 2018, p. 12). The symbolic meaning of the scarf is powerful: women can transform a conflict situation into one of peace. As such the scarf is a political symbol. Through stressing in their narration of their political activism moments of commonality, universal experience, and encounters with the 'enemy' which subvert the hegemonic ordering of relations, the 'Mothers' appeal to another mode of relation, which recognises the interdependency of both Turks and Kurds, historically and in the present.

During another interview one of the 'Mothers' referred to when the Kurds fought to free the city of Çanakkale during First World War:

'You go to Çanakkale, it's all Kurds, Kurds freed this country and still this country has no rights/justice (hak/hukuk) for the Kurds. If it doesn't suit them, they say: "one language, one way, and one colour, if you accept then do, if not leave", but the welat is our welat, water is our water, home is our home. But we want freedom. We don't say we want our own homeland, we've fought together, we freed Turkey

from the regimes of the world. Turkey is a NATO country and if it is, that is due to the Kurds.'

What is both important and interesting to note here, is how the politics of the 'Mothers' deny the logics of coloniality, hierarchy and dominant history-making, retelling the story of the past in order to open up the possibility of a different future. And as such the 'Peace Mother' becomes the border-crossing element who under the guise of humanity can be an actor that mediates and talks to all parties involved, soldiers, the state, the PKK, as the political frontiers otherwise are clear and its actors do not engage with one another (Üstündağ, 2019, p. 122). Consequently, the space between their political subjectivity and the subject position of 'Peace Mother' places them in an opening of (im)possibility between the colonial and decolonial frontiers.

Sexuality and Women

The 'Peace Mothers', as this article understands them, are the middle-ground in a decolonial conflict which operates through a gendered dichotomy, and, as such, their bodies have become a site through which which intimidation and punishment of the 'other' can be made manifest. The Kurdish body functions here as the site where competing political texts are inscribed, essentially meaning that 'the corporality of people become privileged mediums for reorganising the body politic and for forcibly controlling the movement of persons and ideas [...]' (Coronil & Skurski, 1991, p. 290). Any attack on a 'Mother' on this logic, necessitates that the boundary between the 'Mother' and the community as a whole becomes indistinguishable – an attack on a woman is an attack on the community (cf. Aretxaga, 1997, p. 69).

In the context of Kurds, an attack on women is often framed as an offence and violation of their *namus* (often translated problematically as "honour") as well as that of the family and the larger Kurdish community. *Namus* ("honour") is a proprietary discourse (a discourse of that which is proper) which shapes subjects' ways of being, doing and saying, as well as their relationship to one another. As a discourse its most vivid inscription is to be seen upon the female body, who are viewed as the embodiment of *namus*. *Namus*, therefore, is often reduced to sexuality so an attack on *namus* essentially is a transgression of sexual norms and the self. However, *namus* is not only about sexual transgression, but more-so about a proper way of living. The tension of what *namus* constitutes is seen in the space between the thought of Öcalan, which largely influences most female political agents, and the discourse of the Turkish state. For Öcalan and the politically active women, *namus* does not reside in the body of women *per se*, and as such their bodies does not require protection, but rather is to be found in the Kurdish nation (Çağlayan, 2012, p. 12).⁹ From the colonial gaze of Turkey, however, the importance of *namus* in the broader social context of Turks and Kurds is undisputed, and as such, any attack upon that which represents *namus* becomes a site where they can inflict most pain upon all Kurds, both individually and collectively.

The colonial lens through which these Kurdish women are apprehended by the state is gendered, a fact which the 'Mothers' testimonies attested. As such, their sexuality is not bracketed, nor are they sacred and untouchable. The 'Peace Mothers' existence involves a constant negotiation of their subject position against colonial policies, so they can protect themselves from

⁹ This view in the discourse of Öcalan and the PKK is somewhat theoretical, and does not always map onto the desires, affects and experiences of Kurdish women within the movement, including the 'Peace Mothers'. There still exists a tension insofar as *namus* resides in the nation, but still speaks to a matter of the female body, and its integrity in relation to the norms of *namus*.

undignified behaviour from state actors and adhere to the notions of gender propriety particular to Kurdish society (Weiss, 2010, p. 57). Handan Çağlayan (2012, p. 22) points to how women's mobilisation in the struggle for freedom for Kurds, did not give these women social freedoms, since they had to become desexualised, work alongside men, and neglect their female identity in exchange for "liberation". Such was necessary, Çağlayan (2012, p. 22) argues, in order for these women to not be seen as transmitters of culture but as active participants. Quite clearly, the 'Mothers' are doing both, when they walk the streets they not only participate in politics, but continue to emphasise the importance of Kurdish language, Kurdish struggle, Kurdish identity, Kurdish land. One 'Mother' also expressed that their movement and its challenging of state colonialism through a call for democracy also extended *'into feudal society'*.

Politically engaged female bodies have regularly been inflicted with sexual violence and harassment as they appear in public (Aras, 2015, pp. 174-177; Alkan, 2018, p. 83). Such a violence is reinforced as a result of colonial politics and conditions of the conflict, which imply that women's bodies become targets of violence. Is it here useful to analytically distinguish between the subject position and political subjectivity of the 'Mothers?' Their subject position is determined by the discourse of the state, and as improper 'Mothers' they are rendered vulnerable and exposed to sexualised forms of violence. The 'Mothers' are, in this sense, as Åhäll argues extending the identification of their children to themselves in their political subjectivity. As such the 'Mothers' womb is discursively produced as a recruiting station for the PKK (Åhäll, 2015, p. 22). As bodies that are conflated with 'terrorism' and 'separatism', they are considered unworthy and undignified. The 'Peace Mothers', however, refuse to accept the state discourses of either re-interpellating Kurds as Turkish citizens or through strategies of criminalisation, and this is seen in how they respond to sexual violence too. They refuse by resisting and not letting it make them feel 'unworthy'.

When 'Mothers' appear, their 'bodily necessities' and sex/gender are rendered invisible and relegated to a hidden or 'intimate world' (Rose, 2018, p. 46). Yet it is precisely this hidden and 'intimate world' that is made visible through the sexualised violence of the police. Their bodies which are simultaneously deemed 'sacred' due to their motherhood, and yet deviant as being fertile 'wombs' for 'terrorists', are politically targeted to the effect that 'Peace Mothers' are not protected by the normative citizenship which would otherwise secure their liberty. Whilst the 'Peace Mothers' are conforming to Kurdish standards of femininity, they further challenge the ideas of what traditional motherhood looks like; included in political life, they are still protecting their properness, although they clearly are acting improperly and claiming space and voice to be heard, under conditions of hostile erasure.

The harassment from the state is sometimes clearly gendered and renders them as sexual targets. Further, all the political women I spoke with had experienced some sexual harassment from the police. The forms of violence used in relation to the 'Peace Mothers' have included: groping, sexualised forms of physical and verbal intimidation, strip searches, and vaginal examinations. Begoña Aretxaga (1997, p. 52) refers to how house searches and strip searches, alike, both touch upon and violate the bodies and personal integrity of women. The 'Mothers' bodies are not only the middle-ground, they are also the battle-ground. Motherhood might be the place where no sexual overtones are seen, and yet in the eyes of the state, sexuality cannot be unseen (Lugones, 2020). Their (de)-sexed bodies are clearly sexualised in their encounter with the colonial gaze. This is a point several interview partners touched upon:

'And with a Mother we went to Siirt, we went for a visit, we have seven parliaments as Peace Mothers, and we go visit each other. So, we went to visit. We were about to leave Siirt and they came with Kalashnikovs behind us and said: "wait wait". There, I said to them "What is it". We were going to leave the car, but a female police officer said to me: "you, there, don't go down". Then the female police officers came with their truck, they arrested us and pulled us towards them. It was warm, it was July. They took us to the truck, and they stripped us off, us naked, in our underwear, they searched with their hands, and their put their hands inside our body parts. I didn't have energy, my case was ongoing, I didn't have energy to pursue this incident.'

House searches, engagement with police, constant interruption and detention is not stopping women from staging their 'decolonial insurgency' or non-violent aggression. They disclosed incidents where police officers would harass them and follow them to the doctors, to see their lawyers or even follow them home. Every move they took was monitored and their presence felt as mere intimidation.

One middle-aged, politically active woman, who was not a 'Mother', described how she had been followed by a police officer at night-time when she was going home, and that the police officer had grabbed her from behind touching her breast. Another woman was raped in prison and subjected to torture. And a few years later when she was released, she encountered a police officer at the entrance of a prison, where she was going to visit her uncle. She was carrying her baby cousin. She described how not allowing the state's agents to make one feel unworthy, was for Kurds a form of resistance:

'I went passed him and he said to me: "is it my child?". I said: "pardon me" and he said: "is it mine" and in that moment, when I went into the visit, I was in a very bad state, my hands and arms were shaking. And this upset... my uncle in prison picked up on, whether I wanted it or not, and my uncle also got upset. Because you're still child, you're only sixteen or seventeen years old, the anger... What do you do to calm down that anger? Attacking doesn't work, you can't attack. Maybe in that moment you'd like to attack, destroy, or spill (things), maybe it can calm your anger, but you can't do that either. You have to just swallow it. I went to my uncle and my uncle said: "my daughter what they are doing is serefsizlik (dishonourable), it's not going to be left to them. It's not going to be left to anyone. You're a proud namusli (proprietary)¹⁰ girl... woman. Walk out with your pride and namus, when you walk out of here held your head high, this didn't happen to you because you wanted it, it was forced upon you." In that moment, my uncle is saying everything, I'm saying "yes! yes!" to my uncle, I'm moving my head, but my mind and inside is elsewhere. I relived those moments, those words, in my dreams, during night, those words from that man came to my mind. And of course, I experienced the psychological effects of this, and it took me a while to get rid of it, and then... it took me some time to get over it.'

¹⁰ Seref and *namus* are translated to honour in English. I argue in my larger research project that *namus* is mistranslated and is better captured by calling it gender propriety in English.

Unlike the notion of perceived taboos in talking about sexuality in the Kurdish community at large, these women were open, honest and addressed the sexual and gendered violence. For them, they wanted to illustrate that they did not think like the state, in gendered terms, in masculinist terms, they were not viewing the body in that manner.

To some extent a superiority and different sense of consciousness was expressed by these women when they referred to and re-narrated their experiences highlighting how the colonial was not only power-hungry but clearly obsessed with sex and sexuality, with desire. One 'Mother' narrated the following: *'even the police said things to me, I was going out of a panel talk... he said... "if it's my fate I'll use it", I turned around and said "you're a state man, you're dirtying the state", I said a lot of things, but I didn't say anything that didn't suit me...'* The reasons for sexual violence were expressed as she continued to recount:

'let me tell you what I think now. At that time there was... with us Kurds the namus (propriety) concept is very significant, so getting hold of a woman like that, getting close like that, was symbolically like destroying her. Like I come from a big family, whether you want it or not, I would share this with my society, they will know and when they know they will stand more on their feet, they will be even more angry. It creates a reverse reaction but then they... or... I don't know, I don't know what they are thinking. Maybe it was to destroy my self-respect, to break my resistance. They broke my self-esteem as a child, but I actually think they broke their own self-respect. I'm not embarrassed, I've never been embarrassed.'

Kurds are not letting this destroy them, even if that is their 'weakness': *namus* (gender propriety). They might be people without property, but they are 'proper' and have 'a people', who are resistant and cannot be ruined by the state. For them gender propriety through norms of *namus* is political, you cannot control how the state reacts to you, and it will likely attack what it perceives to be most important to you, namely your *namus*, but rejecting that undignified attempt is also a form of resistance.

The state actors whom these women are confronted with, clearly see the body of Kurds as inhuman, and these women's bodies were seen as animal, non-gendered, and only seen through their sexual organs, as useful bodies which have a monetary value attached to them as if they are considered property (Lugones, 2020, p. 32). So, harming the Kurdish body is to harm the property-cum-propriety of Kurds. And as such the struggle between the 'Mothers' and the state becomes one of the proper, one of morality and sexuality. These women's political subjectivity challenges the norms of who should appear on the streets in protest, and simultaneously they continue to uphold the social logics of *namus* in relation to a hegemonic Kurdish femininity. And yet, such norms are not being upheld when they are clearly breached by the violence of a state actor, in which case they are resisted. Consequently, a selectivity of norms applies in which the particular norms of femininity change character and *force* when met with the colonial gaze and touch.

Conclusion

The 'Peace Mothers', I have argued, are placed in-between their children and the state. They occupy a position capable of demolishing the colonial frontiers through their ability to challenge the status as Kurds as 'inhuman' and see all through 'the eyes of the mother', a view which is understood by the 'Mothers' themselves, to be merciful, compassionate and all

encompassing. The 'Peace Mothers' are a feminist network of women who are challenging the violent policies and racial hierarchies of the state through 'aggression' and 'in-surgency', which are non-violent and yet still forceful. Using their bodies and the symbol of the 'white scarf' in their struggle for meaning, they occupy a space marked by resistance and domination. Such domination is manifest through harassment, physical violence and sexual violence. Attacking a 'Peace Mother' or any Kurdish woman is an attack on Kurds, as the 'Mothers' and their community has become indistinguishable.

The members of the 'Peace Mothers' movement, are reworking their political education which overlaps with some of their children's decolonial demands, and yet they are still referring to justice and equality, expecting the state to deliver the conditions of a future life where the Kurds will be seen as worthy and recognised. By emphasising human interdependency and making a different bio-political claim than the one presently offered by the Turkish state, the 'Peace Mothers' appeal to ideas of peaceful coexistence, functioning as border-crossing agents, with the self-asserted capacity to enable something 'new'. They are, I argue, a decolonial movement in and of their own right, as they strive to tell a different story, these 'Mother's' political struggle, through making visible that which the state would otherwise prefer to erase; re-narrating the would-be-hegemonic temporalities and myths of the political terrain of the Turkish state and Northern Kurdistan.

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