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Mothers' Grief and Love in War and Resistance: Visuals, Aesthetics and Storytelling

Amya Agarwal[1]

Abstract

Following Roland Bleiker's (2009) excellent suggestion to embrace an aesthetic engagement with international politics (as opposed to mimetic approaches), this paper analyses artistic endeavours to make sense of the gendered narratives in the midst of violence and resistance. In particular, this paper uses a feminist perspective to reflect on how visuals depicting grieving mothers simultaneously reproduce and trouble gendered narratives of motherhood and grief in war and resistance. This reflection also directs focus on the transformative potential of revolutionary mothering as reinforced by the Black feminist scholarship. Through an empirical example of a novel resistance artform – a digital mural of a grieving mother made by an anonymous group of resisters in Kashmir, this paper uncovers the significance of art in reinforcing gendered scripts of motherhood, on the one hand, and the creative agency exercised by resisters and artists on the other. This example builds on the pervasiveness of depictions on grieving mothers across time and contexts in the midst of violence and resistance, with particular discussions on artwork by Käthe Kollwitz, Shamsia Hassani, Mana Neyestani – in order to understand what political ends such imageries serve; for whom; and the transnational connections between resistance movements they enable and support.

Key Words: Motherhood, Mothering, Art and Aesthetics, Violence, Resistance, Feminism

[1] Amya Agarwal
a.agarwal@sheffield.ac.uk

Department of Politics and International Relations
University of Sheffield, UK

Introduction

The mural of a grieving mother holding her lost son's photograph is strategically placed on a wall next to a soldier passing by and is encircled by a gun shot, most probably depicting the targeting of innocent civilians protesting in the Kashmir's resistance. This is not a painted mural, but is digitally created and photoshopped on the walls of a volatile location in Kashmir, by an anonymous group of resisters. The expression on the mother's face depicts deep grief, disbelief and the predicament resulting from the loss/disappearance of her son/daughter. The digital mural was posted on Twitter in 2020 and was removed after three years. I stumbled on this mural while looking for material on graffiti and counter-graffiti in Kashmir's resistance. Through this mural and a discussion on other visuals depicting grieving mothers in the midst of violence and resistance, this paper will explore the narratives that such visuals (across time and contexts) reproduce and trouble simultaneously.

Mothers are significant actors in war and conflict, and their participation is crucial in providing validation to both pro-war and resistance sentiments. The agency and activism of mothers in conflict-affected contexts is amply highlighted in the existing feminist literature. This paper acknowledges the varying roles that women as mothers, fulfill during a war/conflict – as perpetrators of war, preparing and sending sons and daughters for war, protesting against war, protesting against the enforced disappearances and other human rights violations, providing food and shelter to militants, bread earners and bringing up children all by themselves in the absence of the menfolk (Tougas and Sgoutas 2015). The focus of this paper is not so much on the activism of women as mothers, but rather on the role of visual depictions in the reinforcement and at the same time towards the questioning of gendered narratives of motherhood. Feminist scholarship in international relations has already been interrogating the narratives and representations of maternity politics, whilst exploring how practices of global politics shape and are shaped by the institution of motherhood (Hall, Weissman and Shepherd

2020). Building on the existing discussions around the limitations of motherhood as an institution that is defined by patriarchy, but taking enough care to highlight the transformative potential of mothering as reinforced by the Black feminist scholarship, this paper adds an aesthetic dimension to the (ongoing) uncovering of the storytelling of motherhood.

Resistance art often involves imageries of grieving mothers across different contexts in the world. Although Michelangelo's pieta sculpture of Mary holding her dead son's body on her lap is considered a popular imagery of a grieving mother, several other (both Western and non-Western) resistance and wartime contexts around the world include different forms of imageries of grieving mothers. Some prominent examples include etchings and sculptures of Käthe Kollwitz, the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the more recent artwork on pregnant mothers by an Afghan artist Shamsia Hassani and Mana Neyestani's cartoon 'grieving mothers' in Iran. Different imageries of grieving mothers are crafted to serve different purposes that highlight the significance of such artwork in war and resistance. In its engagement with such artwork, there is also a potential to explore the social construction and association of grief and love with motherhood. Within these broader conversations that are highly relevant to the feminist and aesthetic approaches to IR, the paper discusses the above mentioned digital mural (alongside the interviews of two prominent mural artists and a fine arts student in Kashmir), and few existing artworks across time and contexts; to assess how they simultaneously addresses the themes of maternal love, grief and agency; and how such artworks may enable and support transnational connections between resistance movements .

Methods

The paper conducts a visual analysis of four pictures and one sculpture. These include pictures of two paper-art work of pregnant mothers by a popular Afghan graffiti artist, Shamsia Hassani; one cartoon by an Iran cartoonist, Mana Neyestani and last is a picture of a digital mural of a

grieving mother, made by an anonymous resistance group in Kashmir. The sculpture studied in the paper, called Pietà, was made by a German artist Käthe Kollwitz in 1937. Writing about motherhood in the Kashmir resistance as a postdoctoral fellow in Germany, I often received gentle nudges to Käthe Kollwitz and her artwork during colloquia and presentations. To further my research and to understand the overlaps in resistance art, I visited Käthe Kollwitz museum in Cologne, and more specifically to view and explore the themes of motherhood addressed in her art. The museum visit resulted in a deeper fascination with the depiction of maternal grief and loss.[2]

Whilst Käthe Kollwitz's art presents a historical perspective, the research on the artwork of Shamsia Hassani and Mana Neyestani was pursued with the primary goal of understanding contemporary resistance art that depicts motherhood. Two further goals of – 1. finding overlaps and channels of connection with the resistance art in Kashmir, considering that the resistance in Afghanistan and Iran have been historically significant in Kashmir's resistance; and 2. Exploring the pervasiveness and power of the visual depiction of mother's grief – over time and geographies. Shamsia Hassani's art was viewed and studied through her Instagram page, whereas Mana Neyestani's cartoon were viewed through online news platform.

Furthermore, the selection of the artists (Käthe Kollwitz, Shamsia Hassani and Mana Neyestani) to understand the aesthetics of artwork on grieving mothers is based on their powerful depiction of maternal grief and loss; and the influence their art has had in their respective contexts. Gordon Graham (1997) explains the significance of distinguishing works of art that simply assert and those that lead to a deeper understanding of politics. Going by the

[2] The insightful guided tour in the museum and the material bought was funded by Arnold Bergstraesser Institute, Freiburg and I am grateful for the same.

latter, this paper has selected artworks that are complex, layered and support a deeper understanding of power relations.

The paper uses a feminist methodological approach by including gender as a central feature of studying aesthetics of artwork. The study of aesthetics is in line with Bleiker's (2018) argument that visual works differently from other works and that imageries build their own analytical methods. The paper also takes inspiration from (Rose 2016) and (Andrä et al 2019)'s work on compositional analysis of visuals and artwork to unsettle the prevalent approaches to understand war and militarized violence. The scholarship on aesthetic politics, is cross-disciplinary in nature – and hence the paper brings together literatures and artworks that are usually not discussed together, and centers aesthetics within broad conversations on motherhood, that are highly relevant to IR, in particular feminist scholarship.

Some of the questions that have guided the visual analysis include: What messages do the visuals convey? How are gendered scripts of motherhood reinforced and troubled in/through these depictions? Who is the artist, why would she/he/they create this artform and who is the audience? What does representation (both of the object and artistic) mean in the visuals? Are these visuals representative of the artist's story and agency?

As mentioned before, the digital mural in Kashmir was viewed on twitter while collecting visuals on graffiti and counter-graffiti in Kashmir resistance. To further understand the evolution of resistance art and methods in Kashmir, two popular mural artists in Kashmir, along with a student from fine arts, also an artist, were interviewed through a virtual platform. One of the interviewed artists was arrested for his mural of a sobbing woman painted in support of Palestine. The second artist had an in-depth knowledge of resistance art. When interviewed, both the artists had been working on culturally representative murals based on the orders by the Indian government. The third interviewed artist, a Fine Arts student in the Kashmir University, was selected for his alternative yet popular method of rendering the body as a

canvas. Inspired by their grandmother's folk stories, they carry a lantern and travels in different parts of the world – 'in search of God' and narrates self-composed poems[3].

Although several photographs of grieving mothers have been popular in Kashmir's resistance movement, the paper discusses the digital mural of a grieving mother. This mural is selected for the alternative perspective it brings towards method of artwork and the story of the treatment of dissent that such artwork carries. The mural was created by an anonymous group of resisters in 2014 with a digital software and through photoshop placed on the picture of a blank wall with a soldier walking by. It was posted on social media along with four other digital murals, but these are now deleted. The pictures of these murals still existed on social media during the course of writing this paper. In line with (Wood 2006) consent and do no harm imperative, the names of the artists and the group that created the digital mural have been anonymized. Remote field research in the form of open-ended online interviews were conducted while reflecting on my positionality (Henry et. al 2009) vis-à-vis Kashmir (as a woman, born in a family following Hinduism, from Bhopal/Delhi, an 'outsider' to the Kashmiri society – and interviewing as a staff member of a research institute located in the West). My position carried the potential to set off doubts and suspicions, resulting in an influence on the answers of the respondents. Due to the support of my research interlocutor based in Kashmir, the suspicions were addressed and the interviewees were assured about the academic purpose of the research.

Existing Ideas on Motherhood and Mothering: Stylised Narrative and/or a Transformational Force?

The feminist scholarship in IR has theoretically engaged with the idea of motherhood in multiple ways. This section will take a closer look at these explorations and also highlight the

[3] Kamran Manzoor, my interlocutor for a different project 'Sexual Violence along the War and Peace Continuum' (supervised by Prof. Swati Parashar and funded by the *Swedish Research Council*), helped in arranging these interviews and also actively participated in interviewing. I express my gratitude for his support.

significant engagement carried out by the Black feminist scholarship with mothering, and its potential for social transformations. To begin with, two significant yet contradictory analyses are prevalent in most discussions around motherhood in feminist IR. The first analysis is largely undertaken by feminist scholars (example, Gentry and Sjoberg 2007) who view 'mother' as a stylised narrative within the discourse on women's violence. Such a narrative describes women's violence within the confines of a need to belong, a need to nurture and a way of taking care of and being loyal to men. Based on biologically deterministic assumptions, the mother narrative suggests that motherhood defines the violence of women. There are two characterisations within this narrative – the nurturing mother and the vengeful mother.

The vengeful mother narrative suggests that failure to serve as a mother drives a woman to violence. As (Gentry and Sjoberg 2007) call it – 'motherhood gone awry'. By denoting violence of women as singular, exceptional and freak accidents, such a narrative helps in reinforcing the norms of typical female behaviour and the images of 'normal' women as peaceful remain intact. 'Flawed femininity' is often blamed for women's transgressions. Instead of viewing women's engagement in violence as a deliberate choice or a reference to the socio-political context in which those choices are made; this narrative attributes their violence to a problem in their biological make-up and denies their capacity to make an independent choice (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). The problem with such a stylized narrative is not only the marginalisation of violent women but of all women as it not only defines what violent women are but also what normal women are supposed to be.

The nurturing mother narrative, on the other hand, restricts women's involvement in violent activities to the acceptable socially constructed role of mother. So, the nurturing mother does not challenge the norms of femininity and operates from the 'field of honour', represented by the private sphere. Such a narrative is built on the strong association between women and the private sphere. Elshtain through her study in war and conflict has showed the construction

of dramatic dichotomies between men/ war/ battlefront and women/peace/homefront where the homefront characterizes femininity (Elshtain 1995). The war or armed conflict is then supposedly served through an elaborate 'homefront' support (Horn 2010). A nurturing mother narrative portrays women as symbols of trauma, exile and resistance. Such a narrative overlooks their political choices and ideological understanding; instead it renders their support of violent practices as a matter of personal circumstances and maternal desire. Few studies in the past show how the 'maternal sacrifice' is capitalised by 'the war propaganda in the cultural battle to capture citizens' hearts and minds' (De Volo in Lorentzen and Turpin 1998). This is because maternal imagery is emotionally evocative and thus a powerful symbolic resource in garnering public support for war. Such stylised narratives essentialise women's role as mothers in conflict and deny them their personhood.

Another variation of this perspective is provided by Ahäll (2012) who uses a 'grammatical' rather than a material approach to understand representations of women's agency and also treat motherhood as an idea rather than a practice in peace and conflict. In doing so, (Ahäll 2012) focuses on the 'myth of motherhood' as a significant meta-discourse disciplining representations of female agency. By conceptualising motherhood as a myth, Ahäll argues that it is possible to confront essentialist ideas about gender, agency and violence. Similarly, a volume on motherhood (Weissman Hall and Shepherd 2020:), views it 'as an institution which is troubled, complicated and constructed in diverse ways across diverse settings'. They attempt to find a way out of the stereotyping of motherhood that Krystalli calls 'an essentialist dead end' in order to pay close attention to who uses the discourse and imagery of motherhood and to what end? (Krystalli 2017). Inspired by Ruddick's (1980, 1995) ideas on mothering, ethics and peace, the volume proposes a closer scrutiny of the performances and practices of motherhood, considering maternality is not a homogenous and universal standpoint. Additionally, Fiona Robinson, who writes the foreword to the volume, speaks of

the need to reclaim the voice of feminist ethic - not because it belongs to women or because it is anti-men but because it demands a questioning of the script of patriarchy. This reclamation, according to her, is incomplete without a critique of patriarchy and the disciplinary institution of motherhood that have divided and binarized women into good and bad. Such an important analyses carried out by feminist scholarship in IR has interrogated the representations of motherhood and explored how practices of global practices shape and are shaped by the institution of motherhood.

The second significant feminist analysis suggests that motherhood provides an avenue for empowerment where women as mothers display political agency in times of conflict, and where they challenge the circumstances that oppress them (Takseva and Sgoutas 2015). Within the confines of imposed mother narratives, women negotiate and claim spaces. Through their respective case studies, feminists have visbilised behind-the-scene activism of women, especially in their role as mothers in conflict. (Parashar 2014:), for instance, mentions 'motherhood is a much venerated aspect of a woman's life and South Asia is particularly rife with stories of valiant, courageous and valiant mothers who have played roles politics, war and revolutions.' Motherhood maybe an invoked narrative by patriarchal projects to reinforce feminine ideals, but studies like those of Parashar insist upon acknowledging women's negotiation of new spaces within these narratives. Such negotiations can be both disruptive or complicit in the existing socio-political order. Here (Bucar 2011)'s concept of 'creative conformity' is relevant, which comprises 'actions that may not produce ends that appear feminist within a secular-liberal framework, nor necessarily align with the intentions of the agent, but nonetheless influence gendered norms about the moral life.' Considering motherhood as a site of empowerment is to recognize the creative potential of women to negotiate spaces and engender social and cultural transformations. This creative agency

deployed by women is often overlooked due to its lack of subversive character, but is significant in shedding light on the nuances of women's agency.

Feminist IR has richly engaged with and explored motherhood in world politics, but more clear distinctions between motherhood and mothering are visible in the Black feminist scholarship, as they provide a significant perspective on the relational status of mothering. As a way to move beyond the universal discourses on the institution of motherhood, black feminists look at mothering as a praxis that "embraces a number of different activities, not all of which need be present in one configuration" (Walker 1995). In other words, they look at mothering when imagined, practiced and lived outside of patriarchy/heteronormative (in particular, queer-feminist mothering), the demands of the nation state and biological determinism (Debele, 2023). Situating mothering outside the 'victim versus winner' binary and moving beyond merely reducing women's bodies to their reproductive capacity, they centre their focus towards complex negotiations with the meanings of mothering in the local, everyday lived realities (Wane 2000). Drawing inspiration from the Black feminist scholarship on revolutionary mothering 'as capable of effecting social transformation through nurturing… and especially mothering to end war, end capitalism, to end homophobia and to end patriarchy' (Gumbs et. al, 2016) grounded in and informed by lived experiences (not only for women, but also for men) and from feminist IR's critique of motherhood as reinforcing gendered scripts of patriarchy, this paper adds a visual and aesthetic dimension in the exploration of both motherhood and the transformative potential of mothering in violence and resistance. What stories of femininity and agency does artwork on motherhood, reinforce and circulate in the midst of violence? How are lived experiences reflected in such artwork? Who curates the stories told through such art and to achieve what ends? Can these curations be viewed as acts of revolutionary mothering? are some questions that this paper aims to address whilst building on the discussions in this section.

Aesthetics, Grief and Maternal Love

The political value of aesthetics in the IR discipline, is evident through the recognition of an aesthetic turn in international political theory. Contributions to this aesthetic turn have focused on photography, film, popular culture and poetry. The investigations into art have also increased relatively, but they still remain a minority interest (Danchev and Lisle 2009). This paper believes that an aesthetic engagement with art can greatly benefit the already rich feminist IR scholarship, and, in turn, a feminist perspective can add value to the aesthetic turn. Going by Bleiker's (2009) definition, 'aesthetics is about the ability to step back, reflect and see political conflict and dilemmas in new ways. Aesthetics not only refers to the practices of art – painting, music, poetry, photography and film – but above all, to the type of insights and understandings they engender.' The paper goes by the broader Romantic notion of aesthetic that includes whole register of human perception and sensations – not only the practices of reason that dominated in the wake of Enlightenment, but also a range of more sensuous forms of insights (Eagleton 1990).

Aesthetic practices are sometimes also pursued in response to loss and bereavement. To explain such practices, (Higgins 2020) argues, there is a wide range of performative aesthetic rituals that are in common connection with loss – examples such as funerals, bringing flowers to the graves, wearing a certain clothing are categorized as everyday aesthetics. Aesthetic embellishments in the form of urns, coffins and tombs also highlight the connection between loss and tangible forms of aesthetics. Similarly, artwork in the form of writings, sculptures, paintings, murals are some examples of aesthetics of memorializing the grief. However, the grief associated with these varied artforms may also be socially constructed and crafted. The artwork depicting mothers' in war and resistance – in the form of sculptures, etchings, cartoons and murals – is also often tied with grief, loss and pain. Mother love constructed as a fixed emotion is invariably translated as grief at the time of a child's loss. Both

the mother love and grief are then sometimes appropriated by different patriarchal projects to advance their respective agendas. Do these constructed emotions projected on maternal symbols actually reflect the lived realities of women as mothers? Margaret Garner's act of killing her own daughter to keep her from being returned to slavery (Carter et.al 2013), which became the basis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and opera *Margaret Garner*, challenges the cultural myths on maternal love. Stories from Rwanda and World War II, of women suffocating their children preventing them from making noise that would give them (and their children) away are more examples that challenge the constructed imageries of maternal love and grief. Similarly, studies like that of (Scheper-Hughes 1993) on Alto mothers in Brazil, that started as a curiosity about mothers' indifference towards their dying infants – "Why the women of Alto not grieve their dead babies?" (Scheper Hughes 2013: 26) – and observed that the mother love emerged as their babies developed the strength and vitality. Not grieving for the dead babies was their own coping mechanism against the scarce conditions of food, water and care. Contrary to the lived realities, the socially constructed and acceptable norms of motherhood rest on undying love, sacrifice and grief – often represented through the maternal symbols. As (Scheper-Hughes 2013: 28) mentions in the Alto mothers' case:

> The apex of mother love was not the image of Mary and her infant son, but a mature Mary, grieving the death of her young adult son. The Pietà, not the young mother at the crèche, was the symbol of motherhood and mother love on the Alto do Cruzeiro.

The symbols of motherhood and mother love intersect with acceptable and constructed forms of maternal grief – denying the agency and lived experiences of women. However, women have also creatively and successfully employed these symbols to empower themselves and create solidarity for their resistance. For instance, the 'mothers of Plaza de Mayo' collectively exercised agency through the motherhood frame. The military dictatorship in Argentina led to disappearances and killings, and mothers of the disappeared

demonstrated at the Plaza de Mayo, the public square located in front of the Casa Rosada presidential palace, in the city of Buenos Aires, in 1977. They marched wearing children's white nappies as their headscarves - the *pañuelo blanco*, the white headscarf became the symbol for their fight and has by now become a "símbolo de lucha, símbolo de justicia" (The Guardian 2017). The public square is now a recognized symbol of their resistance and they have successfully created global solidarity through their identity as mothers as 'Madres de Plaza de Mayo'. In addition to employing their mother identity, the collective practices of the Madres are layered with emotions and over the years, 'such practices have allowed the Madres to create widespread networks of activists and to sustain a social movement community that extends all across Argentina' (Bosco, 2010).

Furthermore, women (and men) have also creatively used the available maternal symbolisms to convey strong political messages through art. Käthe Kollwitz's pieta sculpture, Shamsia Hassani's art paper works of pregnant women and Mana Neyestani's cartoon on grieving mothers in Iran are some examples discussed in the following sections.

Käthe Kollwitz's Pietà, Germany

One prominent example of how grief, loss and motherhood are rendered artistically is clearly visible in the German artist, Käthe Kollwitz's sculpture *Mother with her Dead Son* (Mutter mit totem Sohn). Although the sculpture resembles Michaelangelo's pieta, but Kollwitz clearly states in her diary that it was not inspired by the Mary-Jesus Pietá and in fact it did not have any religious influence. The original sculpture was made in 1937 and is dedicated to Kollwitz's son Peter who died in the first world war. While the original sculpture Pietà is hosted at the Käthe Kollwitz museum in Cologne, the enlarged version by Herald Haacke is placed Neue Wache in Berlin. In her diary, (Kollwitz 1989) writes:

> *I am working on the small sculpture that is the result of my sculptural experiments to portray old age. It has become a kind*

> *of Pietà. The mother is seated, her dead son lying on her lap between her knees.«*
> Käthe Kollwitz, Diaries, 22 October 1937

Before the first world war even started, Käthe Kollwitz had etched 'Woman with dead child'. For this composition, she had used herself and her son as models. In a letter, (Kollwitz 1989) mentioned that:

> *When he was seven years old and I was working on the etching ›Woman with dead Child‹, I did a drawing of myself, holding him on my arm, in front of the mirror. That was very exhausting and I groaned. Then he said in his little child's voice: Stop groaning, mum, it is going to be very beautiful…«*
> Arthur Bonus, Das Käthe-Kollwitz-Werk, 1925

The immense pain, loss and bereavement are themes that underlie Kollwitz's art depicting the grieving mother. Her art is a shift away from artistic realism to more abstract, 'summary based execution' (Kollwitz and Zigrosser, 1969). The intense emotional depiction in Kollwitz's art also aligns with the expressionist movement and psychoanalysis that liberated the artists from the nineteenth century notion that art was to only represent external reality (Khafo, 2009). Several more of her etchings such as 'The Sacrifice', 'Mothers', 'Killed in Action' highlight the deep association of her art with the grief of mothers. Her depiction of a mother's ordeal of losing a son to war shows the horrors of living through the war, and to create an anti-war propaganda in the midst of the beginning of the pro-war sentiment in Germany.

[Image 2: Left picture - Mutter mit totten Sohn (Pietà), hosted at the Käthe Kollwitz museum in Cologne. Image 3: Right picture - Etching of 'Woman with dead child' also at Käthe Kollwitz museum in Cologne.]

Later, in 1933, the Nazi Party authorities forced her to resign from her position as faculty of the Akademie der Künste and her work was removed from the museums. However, her 'mother and child' pieces were used for Nazi propaganda (as told by the museum guide) -

because these pieces seem to depict relatively happier images of mother with her child, in a way supporting the narrative of 'good and sacrificial' mother for war promotion.

The aesthetics of Kollwitz's resistance art is intimately tied to the sacrifice, and her own pain of losing her son and such artwork provides crucial insights into German politics, her anti-war efforts and at the same time selective appropriation of her artwork to advance the pro-war agenda. In a way, the aesthetics politics of Käthe Kollwitz's art reaffirms Bleiker's (2009) critique of Wendt's dislike for poetry, literature and other humanistic disciplines to explain global war or inequalities, and, Wendt's suggestion of employing a full register of human intelligence to understand problems that haunt world politics, ranging from terrorism to poverty.

Kathe Kollwitz's sculpture and etchings depicting grieving mothers also tell us the story of her own agency – of adopting acceptable emotions of pain and loss tied to motherhood to influence the politics of war. But, not merely on emotionality, her authority is primarily based on moral witness and experience of World War I (Sharp, 2011). Through an art that represented her own grief, she presented a sharp critique of the pro-war sentiment. She creatively employed the patriarchal confines of emotion and femininity to make a politically significant contribution to the anti-war sentiment. Her agency continues to serve as a legacy and is now widely acknowledged as a strong highlighter of the horrors of war. Her work in the museums and exhibition also continues to successfully mobilise an international audience against war, through the lens of motherhood. A mother materially crafting her own grief, becomes an act of mothering outside the patriarchal and heteronormative, and, thus a powerful resistance. Her art, the anger against war that it represents, the methods she uses and her own self all powerfully build relatability and proximity with the audience.

Shamsia Hassani's Art-Paper-Works on Pregnant Mothers, Afghanistan

In contemporary times, Shamsia Hassani is the first woman Afghan graffiti and mural artist. Her work has a huge fan following and she has showcased her art in different exhibitions around the world. She uses a single female figure in all her murals and other art forms to portray Afghan women in a male-dominated society. Often she creates her murals based on an imaginary of political freedom and equal rights, with the female figure flying or defying the binding realities. In the world of Hassani's art, the female figure wears a head scarf and the traditional dress as a choice and free of all patriarchal. The titles of her artwork collection – 'Birds of No Nation', Dreaming Graffiti', 'Imagine Exhibition' – all suggest her strong choice of imaginaries and desire for political freedom as an underlying theme (Hassani 2022). Hassani also uses musical instruments in her art, sometimes camouflaged as guns. The female figure with thick kohl laden-eye lashes is seen as playing the musical instruments or wearing headphones with wind blowing her hair as symbolic of freedom. Blue, purple, black, yellow and red are her most used colours. While most of her artwork has an implicit hope attached to them, there are also pieces that show the pain emanating due to both patriarchal and capitalist values. In such art, the female figure is depicted as crying, feeling imprisoned and bereaved. Her murals have been displayed on street (and room) walls and floors of Kabul, New York, Berlin and other cities of the world.

Contrary to her own imagined of political freedom, Hassani is probably now living in exile due to Taliban's take over in Afghanistan, – also pointing towards the precarious and risk-laden circumstances for graffiti and mural artists in conflict settings.

On motherhood, Hassani has created two different artworks on paper of the same female figure as pregnant (Hassani 2022). The first depicts a hopeful expecting mother. She is in anticipation of her unborn child's arrival and her love is represented through hearts in an hour glass. When not wearing a headscarf, the hair of the female figure are often depicted as photograph reels in other of her artworks as well. In the second paper art work, the pregnant

mother is in distress, mainly due to the ongoing militarized violence, suggested through a military tank and black smoke in the background. In this artwork, mother's heart is connected to her child's heart in the womb through a cord and both the hearts are depicted as broken. The pregnant mother looks helpless due to the surrounding circumstances and is unhappy to welcome her child in a war-laden and inhuman world. It could also suggest her anticipation of the loss of her child. In Hassani's website the distressed pregnant mother's art follows the hopeful pregnant woman's art. The order could also probably suggest the shattering of the earlier hope and anticipation, due to the militarized reality.

[Image 4 and 5: Both pictures are available on Shamsia Hassani's official website/ Instagram page: https://www.shamsiahassani.net/art-paper-works]

Although created within the acceptable frame of mother love and grief, Hassani conveys a powerful message about the impact of militarization on the future hopes for motherhood. These imageries are categorised as 'art-paper-works' and maybe an invocation to view the future political imaginaries through the lens of motherhood. The child in the womb may depict the hope and dreams for political freedom, which is imprisoned in the militarized present. Similar to Kollwitz's case, the adoption of the motherhood in Hassani's artwork is also a powerful means to inform and influence the audience about the negative effects of war and militarization. Using the already available frames of motherhood crafted by patriarchy and the bourgeois myth (Nancy-Scheper Hughes 1993), is a creative way employed by artists to resist and appeal for peace and solidarity.

Mana Neyestani's cartoon of 'grieving mothers', Iran

An editorial cartoon artist from Tehran, Mana now lives in Paris as a member of ICORN (International Cities of Refuge Network). Previously, he worked for Iranian reformist newspapers, but was arrested in 2006 for a children's cartoon he made in a weekly magazine

called Iran Jome. The cartoon showed a 10-year old boy trying to strike conversation with a cockroach in Persian, to which the cockroach responded 'Namana?' in Azeri, the language of Turkic ethnic group, which means 'What?' (Committee to Protect Journalists 2006). After spending three months in jail, Neyestani left Iran and eventually moved to France.

He created a few cartoons employing the theme of mothers. One of his cartoon 'Grieving Mothers in Iran' depicts a mother looking at the hung photograph of her disappeared (or killed) son[4]. The mother's upper body is in the form of a missing piece of puzzle and the photograph of the son is in the shape of that missing piece from her body. The powerful depiction of the loss and pain of the grieving mother, draws the audience's attention towards the disappearances and killings of political prisoners during the mass executions in 1980s in Iran. Although cartoons are generally considered humorous, through the depiction of mothers' grief in his cartoons Neyestani employs dark humour to highlight a serious human rights offence.

[Image 6: Cartoon of Grieving Mothers in Iran, available at:
https://twitter.com/mananeyestani/status/464777233660649472?lang=en)

The three artforms discussed above, firstly, highlight the pervasiveness of the visual depictions on grieving mothers across time and different war and conflict ridden contexts. Maternal grief depicted as an imagery is used by different actors to achieve different ends. Whilst such art may not seem subversive of patriarchy and may even reinforce the gendered narratives and symbolisms of maternal love and grief; these artforms also tell the story of the agency of the artists and resisters–thus carrying insights of their lived struggles, courage and emotions. Conventional understanding of motherhood essentializes women's roles based on their reproductive capacity, for which it is rightly called a myth or an institution that reinforces

[4] Many thanks to Kutayba al-Kanatri for introducing me to Mana Neyestani's art and story.

the script of patriarchy – but as demonstrated by these above art forms, the artists employ maternal symbolisms to end war, to highlight the excesses of militarization and human rights violation. Paying closer attention to what stories they tell about the lived experiences of war and violence and why they were created; rather than merely focusing on the gendered narratives they reproduce, can provide a better ground for conceptual inquiries into motherhood.

Digital Mural of a Grieving Mother in Kashmir's Resistance

The above discussed examples of art forms (sculptures, paper art and cartoons) and the methods to create these are fairly known in the history of resistance movements. This section discusses a more novel form of resistance artwork that is created digitally. These are called digital murals. The digital mural of a grieving mother created and circulated on social media by an anonymous resistance group in Kashmir is an example of this new form of resistance art. With an increase in street protests in Kashmir especially during and a few years after 2008, slogans and graffiti became popular ways to express dissent by the resisters, even though they were attached with a risk to life. Graffiti on the walls included 'Go India, go back', 'Pakistan is great', 'We want Freedom'. Kashmir has a long history of resistance that is traceable even before the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 (see Whitehead 2007, Bazaz 1954 and Malik 2019). Earlier directed at the Dogra rulers, the resistance changed form and reasons with the political changes, and evolved as a response to the unfulfilled promises by the Indian state. The past accumulation of resentment against the Indian state resulted in the rise of an armed resistance in the late 1980s, when the Kashmiri Muslim youth picked up guns and crossed the border into Pakistan to join international militant networks. This movement was supported and validated by the civilians, evident through mass gatherings and protests on the streets. Over the course of time, the resistance was met by violent and repressive practices of the state. As a result, the sentiments of resent have passed on to the present generation of resisters, who have further

found creative ways to engage in resistance practices. In 2008, the Indian government reached an agreement with the state of Jammu and Kashmir to transfer 99 acres of forest land to a board that facilitates the Hindu religious pilgrimage from mainland India to Amarnath cave. Local inhabitants in Kashmir rejected this decision as a massive violation of Article 35 A and 370, that granted autonomy to the state. This led to a large rally that protested against this decision (The New York Times 2008). The state security forces used pellet guns and other violent measures to quell dissent, thus resulting in an extremely volatile situation. In 2010, there was another street rebellion, which also resulted in the formation of an indigenous militancy movement composed of educated young men, who posted pictures of themselves on social media platforms and became popular militant heroes in the valley.

The street resistance got stronger in 2016 when a popular young militant hero Burhan Wani was killed by the Indian state armed forces. This time along with violent counter-insurgency operations, the state also adopted a practice of defacing and overwriting graffiti. They manipulated a few letters in the resistance graffiti to change the meaning of the writing. For instance, removing 'Pak' from 'Pak is Great' and replacing it with India; removing the 'go's' and 'back' from 'go India go back' and writing 'I love'. Similarly, another graffiti 'India your game is over' was changed to 'India your game is good' and one was overwritten as 'I Love Modi' (Amin and Majid 2017). The overwriting of phrases by the state armed forces highlights the importance of graffiti and slogans as significant political tools of resistance. Furthermore, the instant circulation of graffiti on social media is a significant way of gathering solidarity for the resistance. As a measure to suppress the circulation of graffiti, slogans, and other forms of protests, the state inflicted repressive counter-protest techniques in the form of detentions, arrests and pellet gunshots.

Graffiti was highly visible during the mentioned street protests, but unlike other conflict settings, resistance art in the form of murals were not as visible in Kashmir. To this, a mural

artist remarked, ‘it is rare to find resistance-murals in Kashmir, as these take time and the artist will definitely get arrested’ (personal interview, 17 November 2022). They continued, ‘It is illegal to physically make graffiti on the walls. You need to take permission from the government. Any form of protest art is the quickest route to arrest and detention’ (personal interview, 17 November 2022).

On the other hand, after the revocation of Article 370 (that granted special status to Kashmir), there is now a hypervisibility of murals assigned by government authorities in the form of cultural representations, traditional dresses, heritage and wildlife. ‘These are visible on the flyovers, main city walls and other public spaces; and the themes and elements of composition are now decided by the governmental bodies’ as explained by an artist (personal interview, 17 November 2022).

In an atmosphere of violence and fear, some graffiti and mural artists had found a new and innovative way to craft murals in the Kashmiri resistance, namely digital graffiti and murals. An arts student’s philosophical remark, ‘Due to the fearful circumstances, people are compelled to craft a new language, even to talk – for artists this means new ways of expression, sometimes through canvas, sometimes digital and sometimes even through body as a landscape’ (personal interview, 8 December 2022). As confirmed by the mural artists based in Kashmir, digital painting software were used by artists to create murals and these were then inscribed over blank pictures of walls. An artist who recently (2022) painted several murals like those of Steve jobs, recreations of Van Gogh’s starry night, portraits of Kashmiri women and artisans, explains:

> Digital painting allows artists to choose from a variety of options provided by the painting software’s. It gives artist access to mimic every known medium of painting and drawing within his/her fingertips. One can work in any medium such as water colour, oils, impasto, etc. using digital tools by means of a computer, a graphics tablet and software. The artist uses painting techniques to create the digital painting directly on the computer through

> various brushes and paint effects. In most digital painting programs, the users can create their own brush styles using a combination of texture and shape. This ability is very important in bridging the gap between traditional and digital painting.

Digital murals, according to the artists interviewed, reduce the risk of physically undertaking graffiti-making on the streets and at the same time, it is easily circulated on the internet. One artist mentioned, 'I think digital murals were used by some groups between 2014-2016 as an effective way to convey the problems of militarization. These take time to be noticed by the authorities, but instantly receive a wide audience and it can be removed quickly as well' (personal interview, 17 November 2022)

An anonymous group created few digital murals and then pasted them on the images of blank walls in the volatile area of 'Lal Chowk' as confirmed by one of the interviewed mural artists. The respondent also mentioned that the group 'most probably' consisted of only male artists. Despite not being physically present on the walls, these murals served the purpose of drawing attention of an international audience towards the resistance movement against the state. The social media account of this group consisted of five pictures of digitally fixed murals photoshopped on the walls in Kashmir. While the other four murals also depict effects of militarization on children and innocent civilians, the mural selected for this paper clearly depicts a grieving mother with the picture of her son encircled with a gun's target point and the soldier passing by the wall seems to hold the gun and is ready to shoot.

The visuals of grieving mothers of Kashmir in the form of pictures in NGOs, magazines and generally on the internet, are widely visible. Such images symbolically represent mothers in Kashmir, such as Parveena Ahangar, who's eighteen-year-old son, Javed went missing after he was picked up by the Indian Army in 1994. She went on to start an association called the 'Association of Parents of the Disappeared (APDP)' and several other families of the disappeared joined her association to seek legal support. Mothers of the association gathered

in the park on the tenth of each month to protest against enforced disappearances. Pictures of them holding the photos of their disappeared sons became the face of Kashmir's grief. The above picture is a digital-mural form of this imagery of Kashmir's grieving mother.

Such an imagery is a powerful invocation in resistance movements. These visuals are also co-opted by the patriarchal projects to advance their own interests. Just the way the state military uses the imagery and narrative of motherland to promote its pro-war interests; resisting groups also employ the grieving mother imagery to successfully create anti-state sentiments among the community members – thus creating proximity to the cause of political freedom. It is however important to reflect on the question of agency when analyzing the artwork on grieving mothers. In the previous examples of Kollwitz, Hassani and Neyestani, the agency was infused in their artwork whilst making use of the existing maternal frames. The example of the digital mural in Kashmir, also, undoubtedly, reflects acceptable femininity tied with maternal love, sacrifice and grief. However, the grieving maternal symbols simultaneously act as empowering pathways for women who employ them – to not only claim a space in the public sphere – but also to form a powerful resistance against the human rights violations committed by the state. The following section further discusses some examples of maternal symbols that have existed in Kashmir's resistance movement – how have they been employed, by whom and what they tell about women's agency and choices.

Maternal Symbolism as Empowerment

Muslim mothering, like other forms of mothering is marked by contradictions and ambivalence and is shaped by a multiplicity of emotions and experiences (Irene Oh, 2009). Malik (2020) has richly and extensively described the iconographies and maternal symbols present in Kashmiri mythology. In talking about the resistance movement, there is ample evidence of the rich history of Kashmiri Muslim women's participation and activism (Malik, 2019). Furthermore, the maternal symbolism of a 'kind', 'sacrificing' and 'grieving' mother have been

extensively used throughout the resistance. The integration of mother-role models in the resistance narrative, have not only provided meaning to the movement, but also carved a space for women's presence and participation in the public life. Three different symbols and imageries of Kashmiri Muslim mothers – Akbar Jehan (the kind mother), Shahmali Begum (the sacrificing mother) and Parveena Ahangar (the grieving mother) have facilitated the resistance in different ways.

Akbar Jehan, Sheikh Abdullah's wife was fondly called *Madar-e-Meherban* 'kind mother' and *Madar-e-Millat* 'mother of the community' by ordinary people who visited her. The mother title was associated with the qualities of sacrifices she endured and the resilience she showed. Her granddaughter (Khan 2014) in her biographical work writes about Akbar Jehan's difficult struggle to keep her life together after Sheikh Abdullah's incarceration. Her refusal to take allowance allotted by the Bakshi regime, her political activism in the Plebiscite front while keeping her children at school and living in a house offered by Sheikh Abdullah's close friend – all the instances create an active maternalist image of heroism and militant zeal (Khan 2014). Through her example, members of the Plebiscite movement were motivated and encouraged to involve mothers, sisters and wives in the movement. This mother narrative helped, on the one hand, to increase the involvement of women in the movement and on the other hand, it also defined the bounds and confines of their activism. The glorification and honour bestowed upon the 'sacrifices and resilience' of mothers, makes it not only desirable for women to live upto this narrative, but also strengthens the validation of the movement.

Shahmali Begum is popularly portrayed as the sacrificing mother of Kashmir. She is the mother of the 'first martyred son' of Kashmir – Maqbool Bhat. Also called the 'Mother of Kashmir', people pay salutations to her for sacrificing not one but four sons for the cause of freedom. Shahmali Begum has become a live symbol of sacrifice and martyrdom in resistance.

Her presence keeps Maqbool Bhat and the history of Kashmiri resistance alive in the minds of people. People respect her for producing the first Mujahid of Kashmir. Her reproductive role, however, is not just restricted to giving birth, but also for infusing bravery and masculinity in Maqbool Bhat and his brothers. Many pictures and paintings of Shahmali Begum holding pictures of killed militants are circulated by journalists in Kashmir and internationally.

The third is the 'grieving mother' image of Kashmiri resistance is Parveena Ahangar, as discussed before, who's eighteen-year-old son was picked up by the Indian security forces in 1990 and then disappeared. Parveena's continued struggle to search for her son and providing support to other parents whose sons have disappeared, has been recognized in Kashmir and internationally. After the failed legal recourse and refusing the compensation offered by the government, Parveena continued her struggle along with other parents in a similar situation. With the help of human rights organizations, she prepared a list of disappeared persons in Kashmir. There are more than 8000 cases of enforced disappearances. Her struggle is recognized and celebrated in different ways by different actors.

Parveena Ahangar and Shahmali Begum have in the past employed the symbolism of grief and sacrifice to publicize their voices and struggles. Through the acceptable norms of motherhood, they have mobilised both the local and international community towards their fight against the state oppression. Creatively they navigated and employed the confines and maternal symbolisms that were, perhaps projected on them even though their lived realities may have been quite distant. It is, however, also important to see how the imageries of mothers are portrayed differently by different actors in war and conflict. The circulation of a role-model mother image can also be seen as a significant strategic move, both in grounding rules for women and garnering their support. The projects of militarism in war and conflict situations often depict imageries of brave, sacrificing mothers to create validation for the pro-war agenda

on the one hand and encourage more women to sacrifice their sons to go for war. Going back to Kollwitz's example, the Nazi party authorities in Germany, portrayed mothers with a militant zeal and criticised the artist for presenting the grieving side of mothers in her art. The grieving mother image didn't serve the masculinist project of violence and hence was heavily criticised. On the other hand, women and other individuals employing symbols of grieving mothers to promote anti-war and anti-colonial imaginaries can be seen as a form of mothering (discussed before) that is outside the patriarchal and heteronormative matrix – carrying a potential for social transformation and hope for future.

Channels of Connections: Art, Purpose and Solidarity

Nuanced scholarship on motherhood in resistance and war zones is emerging, especially from the Global South. Ross (1995) argues that studies on motherhood 'are in the process of moving from the margins to the centre of feminist discussion, the mother being a subject rather than a distant looming object'. Studies on the significance and conceptualization of mothering activism are available from conflict-affected contexts such as Palestine (Peteet 1997); Iraq (Shabbar 2014); South Lebanon (Zaatari 2006), Kashmir (Malik 2020) and many others. Building on this already existing rich scholarship on motherhood, the artwork on mother's grief plays an important role in constructing narratives of motherhood and disturbing them. As (Peteet 1997) suggests that 'mothering activism is a paradoxical practice that is simultaneously agential and limiting, but one that may present an analytical potential for identifying previously ambiguous forms of subjectivity and creative agency.'

The sculptures, art papers, cartoons and digital murals firstly, convey stories of motherhood and grief. The socially constructed frames of maternal love and mother's grief highlight the acceptable norms of femininity that fit well within the scripts of patriarchy. At the same time, they also highlight the possibility of motherhood to act as a pathway to organise and resist war, militarization and the violence of the state. Employing socially constructed and

accepted maternal symbols, and, associated emotions as a means to end war (and highlighting the impact of militarization and state violence) can be viewed as an example of revolutionary mothering (as defined by the Black feminist scholarship) to effect social transformation.

The different art forms and their materiality suggests the significance and pervasiveness of the symbol of mothers' grief in resistance across time and contexts. Kathe Kollwitz's pieta to the embodiment of motherhood by 'Madres de Plaza de Mayo'; Shamsia Hassani's colourful murals to the dark humour represented in Mana Neyestani's cartoon – all highlight the powerful resistance that visual depictions of maternal grief and love can enable. Whilst the grief of the mothers is the central theme in all these art works, the depictions are quite different.

The example of the mural of the grieving mother in Kashmir not only adds a new perspective on the methods of resistance art, but also facilitates a reflection on the transnational connections between resistance movements. The interviewed Kashmiri artists mentioned about knowing Shamsia Hassani's murals from Afghanistan and that many young resisters in Kashmir found inspiration through her art, in order to process their own sentiments against the prolonged conflict and violence. The Kashmiri artists were also familiar with Iran's Mana Neyestani's cartoons and exile; and expressed the feeling of solidarity among all artists. Afghanistan's past successful resistance against the Soviet invasion and the Iranian revolution of 1979 have been important factors in shaping the Kashmiri resistance in the late 1980s; and their resistance material circulated in Kashmir too (such as Ayatollah Khomeini's speeches and literature from Afghan refugee camps) – providing a hope for a resurgence of transnational Islam. Considering the significant past influence, the familiarity with and drawing inspiration from the contemporary resistance art in these contexts is no surprise. At the same time, such artwork have opened channels of affective connection and solidarity.

Kashmir's resistance in the past has also drawn inspiration from the Palestinian resistance in the form of Intifada and other resistance practices (Zia 2020); and women

identifying themselves as mothers in Kashmir often gave references to the struggles of mothers in Palestine as their own (Agarwal 2022). Murals of grieving women in support of Palestinian resistance were also visible in Kashmir in the past that symbolised the expression of transnational solidarity. Whilst there are no direct and visible physical connections between the activism of mothers in Kashmir and Madres de Plaza de Mayo; or between Käthe Kollwitz and the artists of the digital mural in Kashmir, the images of grieving mothers have served the purpose of fighting against abuses, violations and violence. Even though created in completely different times, Kollwitz's art in the museums and the digital mural made by the Kashmiri resisters, the imageries of grieving mothers carry the potential of bringing awareness to the impact of militarization on innocent lives; and on the significance of ending wars.

The discipline of International Relations (IR) has made significant progress in the inclusion of multiple perspectives to study international politics, evident through the aesthetic turn in international political theory. Feminist scholarship in the IR discipline has also evolved by a deeper engagement with the otherwise overlooked themes such as love, emotions and motherhood. Adding an art and aesthetics approach to such engagements can further enrich the feminist analysis, especially in the existing understanding and conceptualising of motherhood. Paying closer attention to the imageries of grieving mothers can also shift the analysis of maternal grief beyond a symbol of biological essentialism that reinforces the scripts of patriarchy, towards an act of revolutionary mothering outside patriarchy – attempting to end war and militarism – a channel for connection across time, contexts and movements. As IR scholars and political scientists, centering our attention on the aesthetic foundations of cross-context resistance movements (that are both physical and affective), of transnational networks and of the expressions of solidarities (visible and tacit), can benefit our quest to repair the harms of war.

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3. Fine Arts student, Kashmir, 8 December 2022

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Shamsia Hassani, Paper Art work, Pregnant Mother-1,

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Mana Neyestani, Cartoon, Grieving Mothers’ in Iran

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About the Author

Amya Agarwal is an assistant professor of international relations at the University of Sheffield, UK. She received her PhD from the Department of Political Science, University of Delhi in 2017 and has held teaching and postdoctoral positions in India and Germany respectively. Her research interests broadly lie at the intersection of gender, violence and security. In particular, she researches and writes about masculinities, motherhood, art and agency in the midst of violence and resistance. She is the author of *Contesting Masculinities and Women’s agency in*

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