



Through Her Eyes: Art as Emotional and Political Expression Among Kashmiri Women

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Abstract

Situated amid prolonged political conflict and entrenched patriarchy, despite bearing disproportionate psychological burdens, Kashmiri women remain marginalized in artistic and scholarly accounts. This study examines how Kashmiri women artists employ visual art as emotional expression and political testimony. Grounded in a feminist framework integrating lived-experience epistemology, affect theory, critiques of patriarchy, and Cixous's *écriture féminine*, we conducted semi-structured interviews with five Kashmiri women artists alongside visual-textual analysis of their work created between 2021 and 2023. Findings reveal dominant themes of grief, longing, resilience, and deep ties to homeland, with art serving as both personal catharsis and subtle resistance. Visual motifs—color, symbolism, and abstraction—encoded layered critiques of gendered and sociopolitical constraints. Participants navigated intersecting challenges, including patriarchal norms, self-censorship, and digital pressures. This study concludes that art is a crucial space through which Kashmiri women process trauma, assert agency, and preserve cultural memory, collectively challenging erasure and simplistic narratives of victimhood.

Keywords: Kashmir, women artists, feminist perspectives, emotional expression, political art, identity, conflict zones, visual narratives

Introduction to Art as Emotional and Political Expression Among Kashmiri Women

Kashmir, situated in the northernmost part of the Indian subcontinent, has experienced prolonged political conflict since the 1947 partition, resulting in territorial disputes, militarization, and civil unrest all of which have contributed to disrupted daily life and widespread psychological distress (Bose, 2003; Housen et al., 2017; Zutshi, 2014). Within this challenging environment, women face compounded risks due to entrenched patriarchal norms and gendered restrictions that shape their personal safety, access to resources, and human rights (Jansen, 2006).

Empirical studies reveal that being female in Kashmir is associated with disproportionately higher rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Depression, in particular, affects up to 60% of women as compared to 51.3% of men (Amin & Khan, 2009; Housen et al., 2017). Yet there remains a significant gap in research that captures women's lived experiences through their creative expressions, and as a result, they are often marginalized in mainstream narratives (Kazi, 2022). Their crucial role in resistance movements and in maintaining the social fabric is often reduced to narratives of grief and victimhood (Wani, 2021), which fail to capture their agency, resilience, and diverse contributions to Kashmiri society.

This marginalization extends into the artistic sphere. Kashmir's artistic heritage, deeply rooted in its cultural identity (Akhter, 2017), has long served as a medium of expression. The conflict has transformed contemporary artistic practices, with many artists using their work to document experiences of trauma, loss, and resistance (Nabi, 2020; Tantray, 2024). However, Kashmiri women's creative expressions continue to be constrained by both societal expectations and the broader political climate, rendering their artistic voices underrepresented.

Within this context, we investigate, through interviews with five artists,

how their artmaking serves a dual role of providing emotional release as well as asserting political agency and expression. Through art, individuals can transform their experiences into a form of testimony that resists the erasure of their realities (Khadija, 2024). As researchers¹—one of us a Kashmiri woman, the other from elsewhere in India—we bring distinct yet connected perspectives to this inquiry. Specifically, the research explores:

1. What emotional themes are predominantly expressed in the artwork of Kashmiri women?
2. How do Kashmiri women perceive art as a tool for emotional expression and coping?
3. What do the visual elements in their art convey about their emotional or cultural realities in which their personal experiences can be interpreted as political expression?
4. What social or cultural challenges do Kashmiri women face in expressing themselves emotionally through their art?
5. In what ways does the lived experience of being a Kashmiri woman shape their artistic practice?

1. As researchers, we approach this study from distinct yet connected locations: one of us is a Kashmiri woman who has followed the creative work of these artists on social media over several years, drawn by a sense of shared cultural identity and resonance with the social and emotional landscapes they depict; the other is an Indian feminist scholar whose work engages questions of gender, art, and expression in complex social contexts. Although we did not know these artists personally prior to the study, we identified their work through publicly available online platforms, a method increasingly recognized in qualitative research for accessing contemporary artistic practices. Our decision to interview and analyze the work of these artists is shaped by our collective feminist standpoint, which values situated knowledge and prioritizes women's articulations of their own lived experiences. Throughout this study, we have sought to remain attentive to the meanings the artists themselves attribute to their creations, aiming to foreground their voices rather than impose external interpretations.

Methodology Grounded in Feminist Epistemology

This study's methodology infuses our feminist commitments into research strategies focused on Kashmiri women's art as creative and sociopolitical practice. We understand methodology not as a mere set of techniques, or procedures, but as a reflexive practice that aligns epistemology (how we know), ontology (what we assume exists), and method (what we do). Grounded in feminist epistemology, our approach combines purposive sampling, semi-structured interviewing, and visual-textual analysis. These methods are guided by an integrated theoretical framework that weaves together several complementary feminist perspectives: the "personal is political," lived-experience epistemology, affect theory, critiques of patriarchy, and Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*. This framework informs our deliberate choices in participant selection, interview questions, and art analysis, ensuring the research amplifies women's voices, exposes power relations, and foregrounds emotion and lived experience as legitimate data.

Our framework is founded on a core feminist principle that the "personal is political," which asserts that women's experiences must be understood in relation to broader social and political structures (Budgeon, 2021; Freedman, 2002), rather than in isolation. This premise became a critical tactic in women's consciousness-raising groups, particularly in the US in the 1960s and 1970s, from the recognition that personal realms—such as home, family, and emotion—are deeply entangled with and shaped by societal hierarchies (Hanisch, 1970; hooks, 2000).

Further, our feminist theoretical stand places strong emphasis on lived experiences as a critical source of knowledge and meaning (Mohajan, 2022). Women's firsthand experiences provide vital insights into the nature of gender inequality, insights that have often been ignored or devalued in conventional research (Code, 1991; Collins, 2000). By entering the artists' personal narratives and firsthand accounts, we validate their voices as a primary source of analysis, treating their experiences as inseparable from the wider context of conflict and patriarchy in Kashmir (Collins, 2000).

Nuanced in our methodology are feminist theories of affect and emotion, which posits that emotions are culturally and politically charged experiences that

can reinforce or resist power structures (Ahmed, 2004; Leff, 2021). We employ these theoretical frameworks to interpret the emotional tenor of the artists' work, paying attention to what Ahmed (2004) calls the "histories that sticks" (p. 127). By employing this lens, we bring close attention to the emotional tone of the artists' works and interpret it as more than a means of aesthetic pleasure.

Our framework incorporates a direct critique of patriarchy and hierarchical power structures, which we understand as a multi-layered system of power—operating at state, community, and family levels—that disproportionately favors men (Benstead, 2021; Walby, 1990). Our critique maps *how* power circulates, not just *that* it exists (Benstead, 2021). The framework guides our analysis in asking: How do these artists use art to resist or negotiate the gendered power hierarchies in their society?

Our approach is particularly vital in the context of Kashmir. As Sadaf Wani (2021) argues, the dominant visual history of the region has produced a linear and restrictive narrative of women, often framing them with a "patronizing gaze" that erases their roles as "participants, protestors, intellectuals, caregivers, workers, and more" (n.p.). In direct response to such representations, this study incorporates Hélène Cixous's (1976) concept of *écriture féminine*. Cixous argues that a "universal woman subject" (Cixous, 1976, p. 880) must break silence and disrupt patriarchal structures by *writing themselves* (and by extension, creating art) into history to inscribe their bodies, experiences, and identities. In the context of this study, this framework shifts the focus from women being passive subjects to active agents using creative expressions to speak, resist, and remember on their own terms.

Together, Cixous (1976) and Wani (2021) inform a dual theoretical frame: one that sees art as embodied writing (*écriture féminine*) reclaiming silenced bodies, and another that disrupts voyeuristic, passive representations of women in Kashmir. Their art thus emerges as deeply personal yet fiercely political—a practice through which Kashmiri women both write and paint themselves into collective memory, reshaping cultural narratives from within their experiences.

Participants: Sampling Method and Inclusion Criteria

The study employed non-probability sampling methods of purposive and

convenience sampling. According to the American Psychological Association (Vandenbos, 2007), the purposive sampling method focuses on very specific characteristics of the participants chosen. Participants had to meet three criteria: identify as women, actively practice any form of visual art (e.g., painting, drawing, digital art, photography, sculpture, or mixed media), regardless of experience level or professional status, and be of Kashmiri ethnicity. In convenience sampling, participants are selected based on their availability and willingness to participate (VandenBos, 2007).

This study used a combined purposive–convenience sampling design. Purposive sampling allowed us to target a *very specific* population (Vandenbos, 2007)—Kashmiri women who actively create visual art—so that the data would speak directly to our feminist research questions. Our convenience sampling took a pragmatic account of who was *actually reachable* and willing to participate at the time of data collection (Vandenbos, 2007).

We generated an initial pool of ten artists by (a) circulating informal calls in our professional and personal networks and (b) searching Instagram for Kashmiri women who self-identify as painters, illustrators, digital artists, photographers, or mixed-media practitioners. The research team, authors of this article, had no pre-existing personal links to these artists, and each artist received an Instagram direct message containing a brief project description and invitation to participate in the study. Five artists responded and expressed interest; they then received a longer email outlining aims, processes, and ethics. The five respondents completed a short screening confirming the inclusion criteria.

All five met the criteria and provided written consent, forming the final sample: Ansab Jehan, Basita Shah, Faiza Fatima, Fozia Bhat, and Khytul Qazi. Their artistic practices spanned various visual media, including digital art, painting, sketching, and mixed media. One participant was a full-time artist, while four balanced their artistic practice with other professional commitments. Three participants resided in Kashmir at the time of the study, while the other two lived abroad, one in the United States and the other in Iran. We deemed that a sample of five was appropriate for the *scope and depth* of a qualitative, arts-based study. Five participants afforded the close, dialogic engagement required for visual–narrative analysis without generating more data than could be responsibly interpreted within

a single project.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each consenting artist completed a 30- to 60-minute semi-structured interview via Google Meet. All sessions were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. The 12-question protocol (Appendix A) probed three broad domains:

- Biographical context (e.g., “Tell me a little about yourself—where in Kashmir are you from, how did you come to art?”)
- Artistic themes and process (e.g., “What emotions or stories do you find yourself returning to?”)
- Gendered and political experience (e.g., “How have your experiences as a Kashmiri woman shaped your creative choices?”)

Immediately after each interview, we invited participants to submit one or more artworks—preferably art referenced in the conversation or that, in their view, best captured any aspect of our interview that was salient to them or representative of “what it feels like to be a Kashmiri woman artist.” They were free to choose medium, size, and number of works to share with us.

We analyzed interview transcripts and artworks in tandem. Thematic coding of the interviews identified recurring concepts of affect embodiment of lived experience, which in turn informed a visual-narrative reading of each artist’s work. We asked: How does the art materialize the stories and meanings the artist described? We attended to color palettes, symbols, spatial arrangements, and stylistic choices, interpreting these in light of the artists’ own narratives. In turn, insights from the visual analysis often prompted deeper or reframed readings of the interviews. Finally, we created analytic memos that brought together textual and visual evidence, mapping common themes across participants to address our research questions. We examined how shared concepts were expressed through both their words and artistic choices. This integrated approach preserved the agency of participants as co-theorists by keeping our interpretations anchored in their own articulations of lived experience, while also highlighting collective patterns across their work.

We address the central research questions of this study by weaving together insights drawn from both the analysis of artworks and the in-depth interviews with the five artists. Our thematic discussion is organized into two main thematic sections: *Emotional Embodiment Resilience and Reclamation*; and *Lived Experience of Being a Kashmiri Woman Shape Artistic Practice, Content, Style, and Legitimacy*. The Emotional Embodiment section begins with affective testimonies of loss and deferred hope followed by discussion of insistence on hope, agency, and connection indicating resilience and reclamation. Other subthemes highlighted in the Emotional Embodiment section include: *Memory, Mindfulness, and Artistic Affect as Socio-political Witness*; and *Visual Affects to Assert Cultural Belonging and Political Perspectives*. The socio-cultural challenges of Kashmir lived experiences section concerns navigating gender expectations, censorship, fear, surveillance, digital vulnerability and algorithmic pressures, and social devaluation of art as a “frivolous” pursuit; Political consciousness emerged from personal experiences of being Kashmiri, and Kashmiriness (Kashmiriyat) is embedded in their artistic instinct and motif.

We conclude our article with how art for Kashmiri women in our study evoked healing, resistance, and cultural memory. Our analysis is rooted in the feminist theoretical perspectives that guided the entire research design. This approach ensures that the analysis remains grounded in the participants’ voices and artworks while allowing us to view the artworks not merely as aesthetic objects, but as complex, affect-laden narratives where Kashmiri women write themselves into history, assert agency, and claim emotional and political space.

Emotional Embodiment Resilience and Reclamation Expressed in the Artwork of Kashmiri Women

Our discussion begins with an exploration of the dominant emotional themes in the artworks of Kashmiri women: grief, longing, resilience, reclamation, political witnessing, and a profound sense of home. These are not isolated sentiments but deeply embodied responses to the dual weight of political conflict and patriarchy, transforming individual pain into shared testimony.

Their art does more than reflect suffering; it becomes an act of subtle defiance. By channeling these emotions into visual form, Kashmiri women claim

space for their stories, resist erasure, and assert agency within a landscape that often seeks to silence them.

Affective Testimonies of Grief, Loss and Deferred Hope, Resilience, and Reclamation

Grief emerges repeatedly as both an individual and collective experience, visually encoded through somber palettes, subdued compositions, and the explicit subjects of many works. Several artists described sadness as the very impulse for creating. As one explained, “It usually starts when I’m sad about things. That’s what triggers the need to draw” (personal communication, November 12, 2024). Her articulated catalyst for creating art is supported by experimental quantitative research and historical evidence showing that sadness can directly enhance artistic creativity, deepen expressive content, and promote more persistent, detailed work (Drake & Winner, 2012; Palmiero et al., 2023).

Basita Shah’s *Goldfish in Jelly* (Figure 1) stands as a visual meditation on grief and stagnation. The slumped figure, watchful eyes, and inert birds encode an environment saturated with loss. The artist explained how the months following the abrogation of Article 370² led to intensified domestic confinement and gendered invisibility:

During the ... lockdown post-August 5, 2019, men and women were confined to their houses, and gender-based norms became more apparent. In such times, to paint myself in my studio surrounded by books and paintings was an act of resistance—I created to exist. (personal communication, November 21, 2024)

The goldfish, trapped in dense jelly, becomes a poignant metaphor for both longing and constraint: a creature meant for graceful movement now lies in stillness, reflecting the crushed realities of living under curfew and surveillance.

2. On August 5, 2019, the Government of India revoked Article 370, a constitutional provision that had granted special autonomous status to Jammu and Kashmir. This move ended the region's separate constitution and bifurcated the former state into two union territories: Ladakh as one of the territories; Jammu and Kashmir combined as another territory.

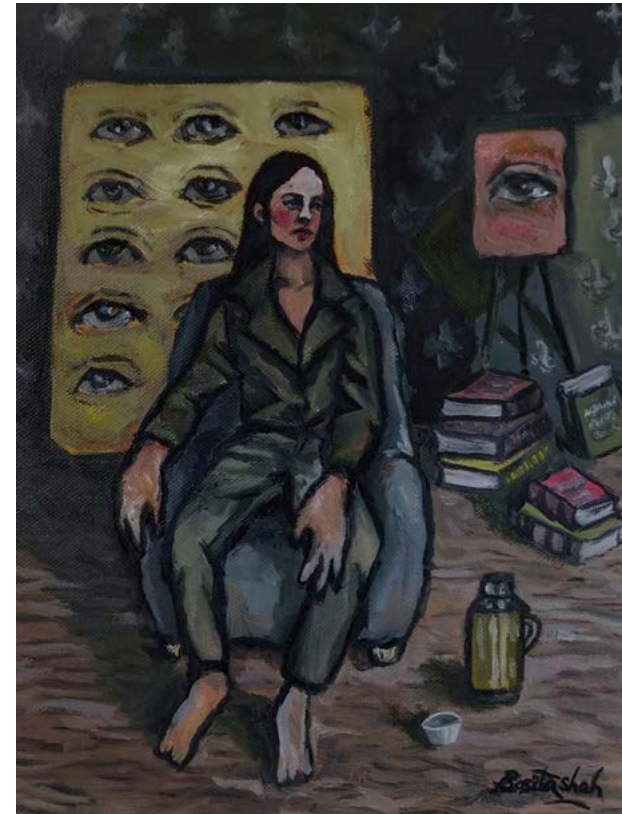


Figure 1. *Goldfish in Jelly* by Basita Shah (2021). Oil on canvas, 9 in × 12 in. Permission to publish, courtesy of the artist. The title *Goldfish in Jelly* deepens this layered symbolism. The goldfish, typically a symbol of fragile freedom, is here imagined suspended in jelly, a medium that slows motion and captures stillness, similar to the atmosphere of stagnation during lockdown. This metaphorical representation parallels the emotional and political stagnation of the time. While the painting’s elements speak to confinement, surveillance, and the quiet weight of societal expectations, Shah’s self-representation remains anchored and intentional. By depicting herself in her studio space, surrounded by books and tools of creation, she asserts her dual identity as a Kashmiri woman and an artist. In doing so, her act of self-portraiture becomes a feminist declaration of presence and resistance in a context that often erases both.

Similarly, Khytul Qazi's *Moon Dance* (Figure 2) transforms longing into a more ephemeral, dreamlike register. The artwork depicts six ethereal women waiting for a sunrise that never comes. In her own words, "The hope for a sunrise had vanished ... they stood afloat, throwing their supple arms free in the air, singing for themselves like they would sing for the moon" (personal communication, November 12, 2024). The scene's quiet despair illustrates longing as a suspended state—hope indefinitely deferred. Yet it simultaneously embodies resilience, as these figures continue to sing and dance despite political abandonment. Compositionally, in *Moon Dance*, the intertwined hands of the women reflect collective resilience. The night setting—highlighted by the artist's comment that "the night is the only time Kashmiris are free, because of curfews"³ (personal communication, November 12, 2024) further transforms night from being fearful into stolen moments of liberation. The symbolism of night in *Moon Dance* illustrates Ahmed's (2004) notion of how emotions circulate differently in oppressed communities, turning sites of restriction into partial sanctuaries.



Figure 2. *Moon Dance* by Khytul Kazi (2021). Pen and ink on paper, 5 in × 7 in.

Permission to publish, courtesy of the artist. The hope for a sunrise had vanished. The six friends, waiting by the lake, were asked to return to the Earth that they had ascended from, for there would be no celebration. But by the lake that had been emptied, with their mouths athirst, they stood afloat, throwing their arms free in the air and singing for themselves like they would for the moon. And with them danced the bare sky. Inspired by a narrative of loss and deferred hope, the women hold onto the idea of a sunrise that never arrives drawing parallels from the realities of Kashmiri people. Even in this state they remain singing and dancing together under a bare moonless sky. Their circular dance reclaims joy, agency and connection in a landscape marked by tension. The choice of traditional Pherans the artist embeds Kashmiri identity directly into the visual fabric of the work, asserting a cultural presence that refuses to be erased. *Moon Dance* thus becomes a visual testament to how solidarity, ritual, and collective expression can be a powerful source of healing and resistance for Kashmiri women.

3. A routine security measure in the region, curfews are government-imposed restrictions on movement, primarily during the day, to prevent or manage civil unrest.

Resilience surfaces across these works not as triumphant overcoming, but as a stubborn determination to create and connect despite hostile contexts. Color choices and compositions themselves become small acts of defiance. For example, one artist noted she used chrome yellow⁴ specifically “to foster hope” (personal communication, November 21, 2024). The Kashmiri women in our study conceptualize art as both an emotional outlet and a vital coping mechanism. Participants consistently described turning to art during periods of heightened tensions or inner turmoil, using creative practice to articulate what might otherwise remain unspoken.

Memory, Mindfulness, and Artistic Affect as Political Witness

Memory, often painful, also threads through these works. Participants frequently linked their art directly to episodes of violence or fear in their childhood. One artist recounted her memory of traveling in her childhood:

We wouldn't go in our car because that was too dangerous. ... So your bus was made to stop. All the male passengers were asked to get down and made to parade half a kilometer. Women and children stayed on the bus, and army men would come in and check. ... Sometimes I would just lie, and pretend to be asleep in my father's lap so they wouldn't ask him to get up. ... I think this is what has stayed with me. (personal communication, November 12, 2024)

This memory finds a subtle echo in Ansab Jehan's *Bus* (Figure 3), where a lone bus traverses Kashmir's serene landscape. At first glance, tranquil, the piece holds the tension of remembered stops and hidden fears. As Talwar (2007) notes, art can turn fragmented trauma into social testimony through sensory and emotional processing. Ravadrad (2009) suggests that the social conditions and the place the artist occupies in them influence the artist's style and the content of his or her work.

4. Yellow is commonly associated with hope and happiness in Kashmir. A unique shade of yellow pigment originated in rural India, possible in Kashmir, from a powder made from sun-drying the urine of sacred cattle fed exclusively with mango leaves.



Figure 3. Bus by Ansab Jehan (2021). Mixed media: watercolours and digital, 15 cm × 20 cm. Permission to publish, courtesy of the artist. The serenity of the environment starkly contrasts with the lived reality of frequent army checkpoints, forced disembarkation, and the emotional toll of routine travel under political conflict. This visual tension between freedom and confinement captures the complex emotional geography of Kashmiri life. The artwork becomes a site of quiet remembrance, insisting on not forgetting the fear embedded in everyday mobility, while simultaneously preserving the natural beauty and emotional connection to home. In doing so, *Bus* stands as a visual archive of both resistance and rootedness.

Similarly, Fozia Bhat's *Flower Map of Kashmir* (Figure 4) appears gentle, using petals to shape Kashmir's map, yet it hums with nostalgia and mourning. The soft pinks and purples serve as implicit affective cues (Castelhano & Henderson, 2008), delicately encoding sorrow. Bhat describes the symbolism in her art as "trying to save fleeting things ... like memories or beauty that might disappear" (personal communication, November 13, 2024). Their symbolic language extends to nature, which the artists used as a subtle way to reclaim agency and memory. The artist's work with flowers exemplifies this, transforming a traditionally "feminine" aesthetic into an act of cultural preservation. In her hands, delicate flowers become a serious archival tool, subtly resisting both political erasure and the patriarchal devaluation of her chosen medium.

Art thus becomes a crucial medium for externalizing complex affective states, enabling the artists to negotiate overwhelming experiences in ways that transcend verbal expression. Moreover, art offers these women a structured means to explore, document, and give legitimacy to their internal worlds. In doing so, artistic practice not only facilitates personal emotional processing but also functions as a deliberate act of meaning-making and self-inscription within fraught socio-political landscapes.

Several participants described art as a path to self-discovery and articulating complex feelings. One artist shared, "I think I have understood myself much better through my art ... [which] has allowed me to put down what I can't articulate otherwise" (personal communication, November 21, 2024). Similarly, another characterized her art as "emotional documentation," emphasizing how visual expression helps her trace and make sense of affective experiences that might otherwise remain unspoken (personal communication, November 13, 2024). Artistic creation allows individuals to symbolize their experiences, facilitating both the significance of social contexts and self-reflection. It also enables the acknowledgment of diverse cultural expressions and for individuals to engage with the multiplicity of their identities (Zhang-Yu et al., 2021).

Participants also highlighted art's role in coping with grief, anxiety, and memories of violence. As explained by an artist on externalizing painful experiences, "It helped me to sort of see these things from a distance ... like put them somewhere else ... like you take it out of your body and you place



Figure 4. *Flower Map of Kashmir* by Fozia Bhat (2023). Mod Podge and dried hydrangea flowers on cold-pressed watercolour paper, 12 in × 12 in. Permission to publish, courtesy of the artist. The use of delicate petals symbolizes both fragility and the desire to preserve what is beautiful and fleeting. The arrangement of these petals into a map transforms a politically contested geography into a deeply personal expression of rootedness and belonging. While the medium, flowers, may traditionally suggest femininity or softness, the deliberate formation of a map reclaims agency over a narrative often dominated by external representations. The absence of overt political symbols does not diminish its impact; rather, it underscores how subtle gestures can become quiet forms of resistance. Through this work, Fozia asserts the enduring presence of Kashmiri identity and the importance of preserving its emotional and cultural landscapes.

it somewhere else” (personal communication, November 13, 2024). This externalization is a well-documented mechanism in art therapy, enabling individuals to process and reorganize overwhelming experiences (Malchiodi, 2012). One artist similarly noted how sketching after a period of severe depression helped her “put [herself] back together” (personal communication, November 13, 2024). Brandão et. al. (2019) highlighted that manual art techniques like drawing, painting, and modeling have been useful in treating depression and other mental health issues.

Beyond direct emotional processing, participants described their creative practices as meditative spaces of stillness amidst the uncertainty of life in Kashmir. One artist likened painting to mindfulness, saying, “It’s almost like meditation. I just focus there. Everything else becomes less important” (personal communication, November 12, 2024). Another participant echoed this, framing her practice as a “persistent refuge” to return to regardless of external events (personal communication, November 13, 2024). Sedlmeier et al. (2012) highlighted how creative engagement fosters mindfulness, grounding individuals in embodied processes that mitigate the psychological impacts of stress.

Interestingly, artists also highlighted using certain elements as subconscious channels for affective release. One participant described letting her “subconscious drive” her hand, allowing hidden feelings to surface (personal communication, November 12, 2024). Meanwhile, another artist spoke of choosing chrome yellow specifically to evoke hope during particularly dark periods, while others described using black as a deliberate color of grief – choices that align with studies on color as an implicit emotional cue (Castelhano & Henderson, 2008).

Visual Affects to Assert Cultural Belonging and Political Perspectives

The visual strategies employed by Kashmiri women artists through color, recurring symbols, and spatial composition, which operate as affective inscriptions of their emotional worlds and embodied critiques of sociopolitical structures. These choices are not merely aesthetic but carry dense political and cultural meanings, revealing how their lived experiences shape artistic form. The visual elements also negotiate visibility and safety. Whether through abstraction that evades censorship or local motifs that assert cultural belonging, their art carefully

balances expression with protection. In this way, visual choices become strategic acts, allowing Kashmiri women to voice themselves.

The artists repeatedly spoke about their deliberate use of color to encode and communicate emotional conditions arising from living under political conflict and patriarchal constraints. For instance, one artist explained, “I use black a lot... I like grieving and mourning. With a black pen, you just focus on the art ... sit with the grief fully” (personal communication, November 12, 2024). Even the night becomes a paradoxical symbol of freedom from curfews and state presence, a space for connection that one artist says: “I think it comes out in my art without me planning it” (personal communication, November 12, 2024). Color negotiates between despair and resilience, embodying Ahmed’s (2004) idea of emotions as practices that pull us toward collective gloom or nudge us back toward fragile optimism. Further, choice of color becomes a ritual of confronting collective and personal losses—holding grief that is otherwise politically inconvenient or socially silenced. In contrast, another artist described choosing bright yellow as an intentional antidote, “I put chrome yellow especially when I feel it’s too heavy ... because I want it to have that small bit of hope” (personal communication, November 21, 2024).

The artists also relied on recurring motifs to symbolically condense layered feelings about gender, political conflict, and freedom. These symbols often carry dual meanings of confinement and liberation. For instance, one artist uses fish to represent a state of constrained mobility and gendered silence, explaining, “fish, they’re like moving, but inside water—always bounded” (personal communication, November 12, 2024). Similarly, buses emerged in the visual language of the Kashmiri artists, rooted in memories of militarized childhood travel. An artist recounts: “I remember drawing the crackdown ... like the bus stopping, my father being asked to step down. These things stayed with me, so even now, when I draw buses, that fear is inside” (personal communication, November 12, 2024). The five artists deliberately used Kashmiri markers—Pherans, local rooftops, valley scenes, shrines—to assert their place-based identities. As one artist said, “I draw women in Pherans a lot, or Hazratbal in the back. It’s like saying we’re here. We’ve always been here. Even if the rest of the world doesn’t see us” (personal communication, November 12, 2024). The

culturally loaded images push back against dominant media portrayals that often flatten Kashmiri women into generic victims under a uniform veil of tragedy. Instead, these affirm complex, living, situated identities that are political precisely because they defy both national erasure and global voyeurism.

The artists also described how “Kashmiriness” is an instinctual and atmospheric element in their work, going beyond overt symbols. As one participant articulated:

I think most of the time when I had to create something, I would try to see how much of Kashmir I could put in there. ... It’s like, even if I don’t try, it just comes. Like it’s there in me. (personal communication, November 13, 2024)

Their lived experiences automatically inform aesthetic decisions, whether in muted palettes or the shapes of hills, rooting their very sense of composition in a heritage threatened by conflict.

Lived Experience of Being a Kashmiri Woman Shape Artistic Practice, Content, Style, and Legitimacy

There are intersecting social and political barriers that restrict Kashmiri women’s artistic expression. Participants described navigating patriarchal norms, political surveillance, communal expectations, and digital algorithms, making emotional expression both an act of honesty and one shadowed by risk. Together, these pressures shape a fraught terrain where creating and sharing art involves constant calculation—balancing authenticity with caution, intimacy with exposure—under conditions that render even personal expression a delicate, risky endeavor.

In navigating censorship, fear, and surveillance, the participants expressed reluctance to fully engage with social media, emphasizing a focus on creation over presentation. Such sentiments highlight resistance to the algorithm-driven nature of platforms that prioritize visibility and engagement metrics over artistic authenticity. As a mechanism of navigating digital platforms, some artists also intentionally seek opportunities to assert control over their narratives on social media. Several artists described using abstraction or layered, obscure compositions not only to convey internal fragmentation but also as a tactical choice. As one

participant put it, “We have a medium that they can’t censor easily ... It’s too abstract to catch. If you know, you know; otherwise, it just looks like shapes. That feels safer” (personal communication, November 12, 2024). Abstraction is a distinctly political aesthetic. Under conditions of surveillance and social scrutiny, ambiguity becomes a means to circulate difficult truths—about gender violence, about state brutality—without triggering immediate repression. It also echoes feminist art histories where opacity and fragmentation resist appropriation and control.

Political instability and pervasive surveillance in Kashmir add yet another layer of constraint. Many participants described practicing anticipatory self-censorship to protect themselves and their families. As one artist explained, “I had to deactivate my account several times. ... Sometimes it would take months to post something just because of the censorship and the fear” (personal communication, November 12, 2024). Participants deliberately withheld or encoded content through abstraction to avoid reprisal in a highly monitored environment. This practice illustrates Benstead’s (2021) call to trace not just that power exists but how it circulates and disciplines women’s expressive possibilities at multiple, intersecting scales: state, community, family, and inner psyche.

Despite digital vulnerability and algorithmic pressures, social media fosters a sense of community among Kashmiri women artists. Art acts as a binding force, subtly creating connections even in the absence of formal events or dialogues. The shift to social media as a primary exhibition space in Kashmir adds another paradox. Platforms like Instagram offer visibility but also enforce commodification and shallow engagement. As one participant put it, “Now it’s become more about algorithms *likes*, ... before it felt like people cared about the art itself” (personal communication, November 13, 2024). This dilutes serious engagement and exposes artists to trolling, shaming, or pressure to conform. Another artist noted, “It makes you feel like you have a community, but then you put forward a thought that’s a little uncomfortable, and ... it just made me feel very lonely” (personal communication, November 12, 2024). Thus, platforms meant to amplify voices also become sites of precarious negotiation, where visibility quickly turns to vulnerability.

The lived experience of being a Kashmiri woman fundamentally

shapes artistic impulse, subject matter, aesthetic choices, and strategies of (in) visibility. Gendered expectations, political tensions, and the intimate textures of Kashmiriness infuse not only what they depict but also how they depict it. The Kashmiri artists' creative work emerges not simply from personal inclination but as a deeply embodied response to navigating grief and fear. In this way, their art bears the imprint of lived conditions, making each piece an unspoken record of how they move through and resist their worlds.

Beyond gendered and political pressures, art is broadly devalued as a frivolous pursuit, especially for women, who are expected to prioritize practical careers or domestic roles. As one participant noted, "I always get reminded that this is not something to rely on. This is very unstable" (personal communication, November 13, 2024). Her comment mirrors Gaztambide-Fernández's (2008) point that art is often seen as disconnected from "real" economic or social stakes. For Kashmiri women under political conflict and patriarchy, making art—particularly about their own emotions and realities—becomes an inherently defiant act, asserting space for experiences usually dismissed or trivialized. They also described how career trajectories themselves are differently judged by gender, as one participant stated, "So I guess as a woman ... you're sort of expected to have something stable. It's easier to allow men to try and fail" (personal communication, November 12, 2024). Consequently, the artists we interviewed balance their creative work with more socially acceptable jobs, which adds layers of strain and ambivalence.

Yet pushing against patriarchy within their own homes or communities brings another tension: How to critique gendered oppression without undermining the collective struggle against state violence. One participant explained this tension:

I like to draw fish often... because when we talk about freedom, I feel we as women are always living in this situation where one cannot talk about the kind of political conflict I feel in my own home, the oppression that I feel in my own home... because then it kind of endangers my community's resistance. (personal communication, November 12, 2024)

Domestic oppression reflects a bind described by bell hooks (1981) in the context of Black patriarchy, where marginalized women are often expected to mute their

gender-specific grievances to protect the broader resistance against external oppressors. For Kashmiri women artists, asserting their artistic and personal agency thus means constantly negotiating loyalty to community struggles alongside a right to critique intimate forms of oppression.

For several participants, art was not initially a consciously political act but arose from an intrinsic, almost somatic sense of necessity—a private response to living in a highly surveilled, gendered environment where explicit emotional articulation was rarely possible. As one artist puts it, "I just do art because I feel there is a need to. Like it's something that happens when I can't really put anything else out" (personal communication, November 12, 2024). This sense of compulsion speaks to how lived conditions of constraint—both political (due to political conflict) and personal (due to gender norms)—turn art into a crucial space of interior expression. Their art becomes the medium through which they can write themselves into existence, sketching and painting inner worlds that have no other safe outlet.

The interviews revealed how gendered expectations directly influence the content and legitimacy of their artistic practice. As one participant explained:

As a woman, you are supposed to only make certain things ... telling me to paint flowers and flower fields. Nobody should have the control or hold the reins to your tongue or your hands or your pen or whatever, whether they are your husband or they are society. (personal communication, November 21, 2024)

Her comment resonates with global feminist art histories where women's creativity has been confined to "less prestigious" or purely decorative subjects (Adeloye et al., 2023). By resisting these prescriptions—by drawing about night curfews, about grief, or even by simply choosing somber palettes, these artists resist local scripts that seek to police not only their roles but also their emotional visibility.

Beyond gender, their position as Kashmiris under decades-long conflict shapes how and why they make art. One participant, while describing her artistic evolution reveals, "There was a time when I just diverted from it all because it was too much. But then I started drawing buses again. And slowly it came back. ... Now it's how I remember things, how I witness" (personal communication, November 12, 2024). For her, being a Kashmiri woman means carrying memories

of checkpoint stops, buses full of silent fear, and her father's vulnerability. Artistic practice becomes a means to process these personal-political experiences and to resist their erasure. This illustrates how, in line with hooks (1989) and Ahmed's (2004) feminist affect theory, personal grief and fears are inseparable from structural histories of violence and political conflict.

Their work, thus, reflects what Cixous (1976) describes as a writing of the body: An urgent articulation of experiences otherwise unspeakable within dominant socio-political discourses. Moreover, following Ahmed's (2004) theorization of affect, their art materializes as a site where personal griefs and collective histories of violence become interwoven, making their creative practices both deeply intimate and irrevocably political.

Conclusion: Art as Healing, Resistance, and Cultural Memory for Kashmiri Women

In conclusion, this study underscores the profound role of art as a medium of emotional and political expression. The emotional themes expressed in their work predominantly include grief, resilience, longing, and a profound connection to their homeland, reflecting both personal and collective struggles. Art emerges as a coping mechanism, offering a therapeutic outlet to process trauma and self-explore while fostering agency and self-expression. Through the use of color, symbolism, and composition, the visual elements in their artworks capture nuanced emotional and cultural realities. Further, the challenges faced by these artists are multifaceted, rooted in societal and political constraints, and include patriarchal expectations, censorship, algorithmic precarity, among other social and cultural challenges Kashmiri women face.

Moreover, the lived experiences of being Kashmiri women profoundly shape their artistic practices. What makes their artworks especially compelling is how profoundly they are imbued by Kashmiriness (*Kashmiriyat*): a textured constellation of historical trauma, cultural rootedness, and the daily negotiations of living under intersecting systems of conflict and patriarchy. Their distinct context does more than inform the content of their art; it shapes its very form, symbolism, aesthetic strategies, and creative instinct. Thus, their works stand apart not only as individual acts of emotional processing but as sophisticated interventions that

transform lived experiences into collective visual archives.

Ultimately, by inscribing their own embodied narratives into artistic form, these women challenge dominant representations that often distort, erase, or oversimplify their experiences. They assert a mode of witnessing that is at once intimate and public, ensuring that Kashmir persists, nuanced, unassimilated, and defiantly present, in all its complexities, within and beyond their canvases.

Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself. How old are you, where in Kashmir are you from, what are you doing, etc.?
2. Could you walk me through your journey of becoming an artist? What drew you to this form of expression?
3. What is your art about? We understand this is a broad question, but what we are trying to understand is what you feel like making art about? What are some recurring themes? How would you describe the themes or emotions that you find yourself repeatedly exploring in your work?
4. Can you describe a specific artwork of yours that you feel best captures you expressing your emotions, or a piece that holds particular emotional significance for you? What emotions were you expressing? What inspired it?
5. Does creating art help you process your personal experiences or emotions? If yes, how?
6. Has your art ever been a way to cope with specific challenges or emotions you've faced in Kashmir? Can you share an example?
7. What visual elements (like colors, symbols, or styles) do you deliberately use to convey specific emotions?
8. How have your experiences as a Kashmiri woman influenced the themes or emotions in your artwork? How does being a woman artist from Kashmir influence your creative process and the way you express yourself?
9. Do you ever feel restricted or pressured by societal expectations in how you express yourself through your art? If so, how do you overcome this? How do you navigate between personal expression and your community's expectations in your art?
10. Could you describe any symbols or motifs that have special meaning in your work?
11. What role do the internet and social media play in sharing your work and connecting with other artists?
12. How do you see your art contributing to broader conversations about women's experiences in Kashmir?

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