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LUMMA! IN YOUR NAME

MAHRANG BALOCH

TRANSLATED BY MAHVISH AHMAD

FOR WASAFIRI'S SPECIAL ISSUE 'Abolitions: Writing Against Abandonment', I have translated an essay written by Mahrang Baloch – a medical doctor, political worker, and one of the most important figures resisting Pakistan's military violence today – about her mother, or her *lumma* as she calls her in Brahui.¹ Written on Mother's Day in 2020, 'Lumma!' is a multi-layered meditation on the erasure of women who mother on margins pregnant with disappearance and violence.

As a Baloch woman, Mahrang has witnessed her people systemically racialised and violently targeted by the Pakistani military. Enforced disappearances, 'fake encounters', custodial torture, violent displacements, and military operations have all marred everyday life, and Mahrang has felt this violence personally. In 2009, her father was abducted from outside of a hospital in Karachi, ostensibly for his political activities: he was a socialist and a Baloch nationalist. She spent two years sitting in missing persons camps run by Baloch families, holding up his portrait and demanding his release. It was not the first time that he was abducted but it was the last. The family found his mutilated corpse, wearing only his shoes, in 2011. After burying her father, Mahrang went quiet, starting medical school in Quetta, Balochistan's capital, wearing a niqab to hide her identity. In 2017, her brother was abducted, forcing her back into the public limelight. This time, her brother came back, and Mahrang began a period of intense political activity. Over the next few years, she threw herself into organising students against fee hikes, university closures under the pandemic, and surveillance and harassment by security forces on campus. She played a key role in establishing the Baloch Yakjheti Council, a country-wide unity movement organising Baloch across Pakistan, after a mother was killed in front of her four-year-old daughter by a 'death squad'. As I write this preface, she is

heading home after a three-month-long protest that started in early November 2023, when a twenty year old was killed in custody. With other women, Mahrang marched with hundreds over 1,500 kilometres and set up an all-woman sit-in in Pakistan's capital of Islamabad, facing arrests and harassment along the way. Other women who led this protest include Sammi Baloch, whose father was abducted fifteen years ago. He remains missing.

Mahrang is arguably the most prominent Baloch woman organising today. The woman-led section of the Baloch movement against Pakistani military violence is the most stunning subversion of public space otherwise overrun by men. Over the past two decades, Baloch women like Mahrang have emerged en masse to publicly name, shame, and condemn military violence.² They've become one arm in a multidimensional movement resisting militarised atrocities. Young Pash-tuns from Pakistan's former tribal areas – a sliver of territory bordering Afghanistan once subject to relentless US drone bombardments and still subject to Pakistani military operations – also launched a mass movement in 2017 after a young model was killed in a 'fake encounter'.³ Violence on these peripheries have older histories, of a colonial relationship between the centre and the margins erected and solidified under British colonisation, and they intensified dramatically with the US invasion of Afghanistan. The Pakistani military started abducting, killing, and targeting suspect 'terrorists' for the United States. Soon, they started doing it for themselves, against internal, racialised, and colonised others, by combining counterterror vocabularies and techniques imported from abroad with older stories and methods of violence (Ahmad and Mehmood).

To translate 'Lumma!' rather than another one of Mahrang's many other articles, interviews, or speeches is a deliberate choice to force us to enter her world, rather than asking her to enter ours. Most of what



circulates by Mahrang, in the form of viral videos, show her as the powerful orator that she is. In them, she is intervening in public debate, delivering damning speeches and subverting anti-Baloch discourse in the Pakistani media. In newer videos, recorded by her in English, she is doing the work of explaining herself, of rendering violence against the Baloch legible, in a struggle to appear as a movement worthy of the time and political solidarity of a progressive international.⁴ 'Lumma!' does no such thing. 'Lumma!' is an essay about the woman who mothered her. In it, we meet a Mahrang who is not trying to criticise, convince, or cajole others to stop the violence or stand by her. We meet a Mahrang who leans into her own life, and the life of her lumma, to contemplate and meditate on a foundational erasure that structures the world: the evisceration of women.

What is so curious about this essay is that it is precisely at a moment when Mahrang is not trying to intervene, explain herself, or convince others, that she speaks to a universal and shared condition. That is why you don't really need to read this preface, or even know anything about Mahrang, to follow her into her world. It's a world that bursts at the seams with love. There is her father's love for his Balochistan. There is the bond between her father and her mother, a companionship she compares to the tragic story of Sheh Murid and Hani, two lovers separated from one another because of forces and codes beyond them, recounted time and again in epic ballads in Balochi. And there is the story, at the heart of it all, of Mahrang's love for her mother, 'a lioness, my lumma'. Mothering emerges as both the force that has kept the world going under the weight of the multiple disappearances that have threatened to unravel Mahrang's life and the burden that has forced her lumma to 'bury the woman within'. Love is both the thread that has held it all together, but also a contradictory power, that has drawn loyalties in different directions: towards nations, companions, and mothers. At the same time, the essay is a profound theorisation of the lumma, and of mothering. On one level, mothering emerges as both the force that has kept the world going under the weight of the multiple disappearances that have threatened to unravel Mahrang's life and the burden that has forced her lumma to 'bury the woman within'. In Mahrang's essay, she ends up theorising mothering as an act of love that sutures together broken lives that comes at an immense cost to the one

doing the labour of holding it all together. On another level, mothering exceeds the boundaries of Mahrang's intimate relationship to her own lumma; there are other lumma in her life she tells us at the end of her essay, mothers of other disappeared and killed Baloch who labour on. Elsewhere, Mahrang along with other Baloch organisers and nationalists, extends the title of lumma to women organisers who have never birthed children, as a crucial reminder that you do not need to have biological children to carry out the essential work of mothering.

As a translator, I am caught between two contradictory desires that perhaps also structure this preface. On the one hand, I want to narrate Mahrang's story because she's part of a struggle that desperately needs those most necessary ingredients: political friendship and internationalist solidarity. This requires translating not just a language, but a political struggle, including the context in which it is unfolding. On the other hand, I want Mahrang's words to stand on their own, without explanation. While both approaches are useful, I feel there is a greater need for us to enter Mahrang's world: for the centre to learn about the multiple margins it has generated, rather than the margins always using the language of the centre to render itself legible. So, I end my preface here, hoping also that her essay can stand on its own, and become a medium through which we can form a connection with Mahrang and the powerful movement and worlds of which she is a part.

Lumma! Is this one day in your name enough?

Lumma! Do you know Baloch mothers are unnamed heroes, their sacrifices rarely mentioned in history? Perhaps, historians never did justice to Baloch mothers. Balochistan's woman stops being a woman when she becomes a mother. Instead, she transforms into a supreme example of sacrifice and compassion. The most beautiful relationship I have in my life is with my lumma; a lioness, my lumma. My life's most bitter memories are attached to her. I remember how she'd cry all night. She was a hawk, a protector of her six children. All day she spent a lioness and at night she became a regular person shedding tears of pain. When she was awake my eyes stayed wide open, I would wait until the sobs would stop before I went to sleep.

Yes, it's true, I prayed endlessly for my baba's release. Not just because he was my baba or because

he supported me in life. After all, Lumma had assumed Baba's responsibilities a long time ago. I prayed for his return for my lumma because his disappearance was the reason for my lumma's tears. Lumma had been living the life of a widow for some time. Her husband had taken off to fulfil his national duty and left six children behind with a young wife, who had death written into her life without her permission.

Am I really writing something in my mother's name? I can't believe it. Would these few words be able to describe the very long struggles of this woman who is a silent soldier of this war? This war to save generations?⁵ Today, some ignorant people ask: what have Baloch women done? Why haven't *they* died like Sabeen?⁶ I say: it's easier to die, harder to live. It's hard to be a Baloch woman and live. The sacrifices of men are remembered, they are given the status of heroes, but what of women's? Can men make these sacrifices in the absence of brave women, and can men ever offer unknown sacrifices like women?

My lumma, her youth passed her by as she took care of this soldier's children, this soldier who'd once sing songs of love to her. But Lumma knew that this soldier loved his nation many times more than he loved her and that he would sacrifice himself for that love first. But where else do you find loyalty except in women? Lumma sacrificed her own joy for his love. She became a mother, she buried the woman inside of her. I was in third grade when my mother became a single parent. The soldier left in search of his true love, leaving his Hanel on her own. She was left alone with six children. Sometimes when the soldier returned, she'd squeeze out all her love and give it to him, and if only for a few days she would satisfy the woman inside of her, remind her that she was still alive.

The times changed and one day, the soldier was disappeared. For her, the pain was unbearable. Her pain lit a fire inside of me, she kept fighting. Yes, what did Lumma not do? In the mornings she'd be a mother cooking breakfast for us and that same morning she'd be a father dropping my brother off at school. Then she'd go pick up groceries, do the housework, then come and ask my teacher for leave because Mahrang's father is missing, there's a protest for him, give her leave. Once I remember that she came to ask for time off and my teacher said, 'Amma, don't even bother to send your girl to school.' Lumma went

outside and cried so much. For the protest she'd dress me in Balochi clothes — 'your father loved Balochi clothes. If he comes out and sees you wearing a frock, he'll scold me and say, your daughter isn't wearing Balochi clothes.' She did a lot for all our studies. Even now, when I study, she will come and make me drink water.

Murid only saw dreams, but without his Hanel they would never have come true.⁷ On my first day of college, she saw me wearing a lab coat with those beautiful eyes of hers, her eyes looked so content — it was like she was addressing Murid: 'Look, Murid! Your Hanel has kept her promise to you! Your daughter's become a doctor.'

Then, one day, the soldier didn't return and my mother became a widow forever. That day, I lost both my father and my mother's joy. She was young that day, too. She didn't cry in front of us. When I said, 'Lumma, cry a little, you'll ease the pain', she said, 'Why should I cry? For the world, your father left today, but for me, he left a very long time ago.' Back then, Lumma could have left us. She was young and, if nothing else, at least she wouldn't have spent the rest of her life with six orphans starving herself. But this Hani returned the love of her Murid. She decided to spend the rest of her life with his name.

Life had become even more difficult. Now she was in the line of all sorts of accusations. She could have left then, too, but again she chose her murid and his love. She did not leave his children behind. I have seen my lumma break. I saw how many sacrifices she made every day. This world wouldn't let us use her name, we would always be known as the children of the murid, as if Hani had no hand in raising us.

Memories take us from one place to another. Let me remember the murid now ... When we were having problems with our studies, the murid told Hani: I need a companion; when I return from months of travel, they should take care of me; a companion with whom I can share my pain; and someone who can make food for my friends; but my children need a mother — their studies are suffering. Look, I will ask nothing of you, just make sure my children study so they can understand their father and his struggle. My lumma fulfilled the promise that she made to her murid.

I also remember a time when people who were part of Murid's nation would taunt Hani. When

she'd stand outside the butcher's store, they'd look at her and say, 'What a shameless man. He died playing with guns in the mountains and his wife stands outside the shop.' Someone said, 'Why is Hani so young? Is she not in grief over her husband's death? Why does she wear these strong coloured clothes? She's an indecent woman, she doesn't even cry for her husband? She would cry, but quietly, and after she cried to her heart's content, she'd say, 'Did your father leave me and all of you for this nation? How lucky he is, that he left, leaving me behind.' My mother was fed up with the taunting. She aged before her time. She stopped wearing those strongly coloured clothes and she also stopped laughing.

My beloved lumma — people used to think she was my sister. I can't even look at her anymore. It feels like my sisters, my brother, and I are the reason for her state. Lumma! I have no words left to say: children like me are not alive because their fathers were fearless; they're alive because they were given the kind of mothers who sacrifice without any medals of bravery.

This isn't just the story of one mother — it's the story of thousands of mothers who live on my land by strangling the woman inside of them and keep the mother alive. My country has thousands of Hanis who spend half their lives waiting for their Murid and the other half in his name. When a murid goes missing, then his Hani goes missing too, and when you find the corpse of a murid, then his Hani becomes a corpse too.

Mother please don't ever be angry with me. After all, I've learnt everything in my life from you. Mother! When it comes to pain and fear, pain always wins. Today, the pain I inherited from you has won over my fear. Your love was my first passion. I'm alright, my lumma. Your pain has tied me to pain. Now, every mother's pain looks like your pain. What you went through when bhai went missing ... I thought, she didn't die after the murid left, but if bhai does not return, you will die.

I have many mothers in whom I see you. Like my leader, Zakir Majeed's lumma when she calls me 'Maro' — it's like you're calling out to me. Like Sammi Mengal's mother — when I take her hand in my own, I feel the same warmth that I do when I hold your hand. Like my lumma, Mahganj, for whom I could not write even one word. As if words cannot do justice, as if there are no words for her sacrifice and her wait.

Yes, my lumma, I have many mothers, and you have connected me to them through your pain. Holding their hand makes me feel like I'm redressing the injustice that was done to you. But it is difficult, my lumma, I could travel through many lives and still not make up for the sacrifices that you have made ... Your sacrifices are great.

My lumma,
Your silly and disobedient daughter,
Mahrang Zareena Baloch

NOTES

[1] Brahui is one of several languages that are spoken by Baloch communities around the world. The other major language is Balochi, yet even Balochi has several variations that are sometimes mutually unintelligible. Interestingly, Brahui-speakers and Balochi-speakers do not understand one another, but the Baloch nationalist identity traverses several languages.

[2] The story of how they were politicised is often told as a reaction to intensified violence, yet it is far broader than that. Remittances from Baloch diasporas in the Gulf fuelled the emergence of a lower middle class that began sending girls to school and university, and a secular and progressive section of a broader Baloch nationalist movement mobilised students, especially girls, through study circles and political organising.

[3] Recently, as abductions and killings once concentrated in the peripheries travelled to the centre — violently targeting supporters of the ruling party of the deposed prime minister Imran Khan — even members of an otherwise military-supporting middle class and urban elite started criticising the army's violence.

[4] Who constitutes this progressive international is the matter of some debate within Baloch nationalist circles. Mahrang largely addresses the English-speaking western world, in particular a set of institutions and governments (in particular the US) understood as strategic and tactical allies if not ideological ones, that can invoke legal and discursive indictments of human rights abuses in Pakistan. Others within the Baloch nationalist movement feel it is necessary to solidify stronger relations with anti-racist and anti-colonial, left movements, and consider the former set of actors largely antithetical to the politics of what they understand as a left-wing, national liberation movement. I have little space to get into the details of this debate here, but suffice it to say that it often finds itself stuck between questions related to tactics, strategy, and ideology.

[5] Mahrang is referring to the Baloch nationalist struggle against militarised and racialised violence, which her father was a part of, and the attack on the Baloch *nasl*, which can be translated into race, generations, or family tree, and which I have translated into 'generations'.

[6] Sabeen Mahmud was a human rights activist and social worker who ran a community space and café called *The Second Floor* in Karachi. In 2015, she hosted a panel on Baloch

disappearances, that had earlier been cancelled at a private university in Lahore, in defiance of attempts to censor the conversation. She was shot dead after leaving the event. Authorities later arrested Saad Aziz, who they also said was behind an attack on a school bus carrying members of the Ismaili Shia community, but Baloch nationalists and other organisers, as well as other parts of the human rights community, continue to suspect Pakistani intelligence.

[7] Here, Mahrang begins to refer to her father as Murid and her mother as Hanel and Hani. There are two ways to understand her naming of her father, Murid. One is to think of him as a murid, a disciple, who is wedded to the dream of the Baloch nation. Her father, Dr Ghaffar Lango, was also a follower of Khair Bakhsh Marri, the head of the Marris known as a prominent Baloch nationalist and Marxist, and often people call themselves the murid of Khair Bakhsh Marri. Another way to read her naming of her father as Murid is as an invocation of the figure of Sheh Murid, a tragic character in a much-beloved epic ballad famous in Balochi folklore. Sheh Murid loses his one love and Hani, to Mir Chakar Rind, a tribal chief, one evening, after promising that he will give up

anything on the night of his wedding and is then asked for Hani's hand in marriage. Sheh Murid abandons his life, and spends his nights in worship, writing poetry in his beloved Hani's name, and eventually leaves and travels the world. One day, upon his return, he meets Hani again looking like a beggar. Mir Chakar divorces Hani but at this point, Sheh Murid says he lives on another level of existence and cannot be with her. Hani is left bereft, and Sheh Murid becomes an immortal saint of the Baloch. Meanwhile, the reference to her mother as Hani is likely an invocation of Hani's lifelong commitment to her Sheh Murid. Throughout the time that Hani is married to Mir Chakar Rind, she refuses to consummate the marriage, freezing whenever approached. She ends up returning to her Murid, only to find him gone, living on another realm of existence.

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