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**Politics of Non-Motherhood in Shi'a Islam: Imagery and Narratives
around Fatemeh-Masoumeh of Qom**

*Şii İslam'da Anne Olmayışın Siyaseti: Kum'un Fatıma Masume'si Etrafındaki Anlatı ve
İmgeler*

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Politics of Non-Motherhood in Shi'a Islam: Imagery and Narratives around Lady Fatemeh-Masoumeh of Qom

Abstract: Religion can be a source of both pressure and empowerment for mothers. It is sometimes speculated that Muslims have more negative attitudes toward childlessness, as Islam values and encourages procreation. Islam also has associated Muslim women's social position with motherhood. Motherhood is frequently mentioned in connection to birth giving, breastfeeding, and caring for children in the Qur'an and Islamic fiqh. In canonical texts, non-motherhood is mostly represented as a struggle for families in general, and for women in particular. In Islamic history, however, there were prominent female figures who were childless/childfree. My focus and interest in this article are to investigate representations, moral and theological contemporary imagery of non-motherhood in Shi'a Islam by looking into the case of Lady Fatemeh-Masoumeh of Qom as a highly venerated Shi'i figure. I first introduce Lady Masoumeh, her life story and the significance of her narrative in Shi'a Islam. I then focus on her story as a non-mother and its representations in contemporary Shi'i cultural imaginary.

Keywords: Childlessness, gender, Islam, non-motherhood, politics, Shi'a.

Öz: Din, anneler için hem baskı hem de güçlenme kaynağı olabilir. İslam'ın neslin devam etmesine değer vermesi ve bunu teşvik etmesi, Müslümanların çocuksuzluğa karşı daha olumsuz tutumları olduğuna dair düşüncelere yol açmıştır. İslam Müslüman kadınların sosyal konumlarını da annelikle ilişkilendirmiştir. Annelik, Kur'an'da ve İslam fıkhında çoğunlukla doğum, anne sütü ile besleme ve çocuk bakımıyla ilişkili olarak bahse konu edilmiştir. Geleneksel metinlerde, anne olmayış genelde aile, özelde kadınlar için daha ziyade bir mücadele olarak ele alınmıştır. Ancak İslam tarihinde çocuksuz bazı önemli figürler mevcuttur. Benim bu makalede odak noktam ve ilgilim, Kum'un çok saygın bir Şii figürü olan Fatıma Masume'yi merkeze alarak Şii İslam'ında anne olmamaya yönelik temsilleri, ahlakî ve dinî çağdaş tanımlamaları araştırmaya yöneliktir. Öncelikle Fatıma Masume'nin hayat hikâyesi ve onun anlatısının Şii İslam'daki önemini ele aldım. Daha sonra onun anne olmayışını merkeze alarak bu durumun çağdaş Şii kültürel imgesindeki temsillerine odaklandım.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çocuksuzluk, Cinsiyet, İslam, Anne Olmayış, Politika, Şia.

Introduction

It is shown globally, that social and gender norms stigmatize childfree and childless women.¹ As a result of social stigma and blame, childless and childfree women suffer personal grief, frustration, social ostracism and economic deprivation.² Religion has been considered a source of both pressure and

¹ I follow other's scholars' footsteps in using childfree for people who are making a conscious choice to opt out of parenthood and childless for those who want children but do not have them for socio-political, economic, psychological, biological or other reasons. See for instance, Kristin Park, "Choosing Childlessness: Weber's Typology of Action and Motives of the Voluntarily Childless," *Sociological Inquiry* 75, no. 3 (2005).

² See for e.g. Susan Dierickx et al., "I Am Always Crying on the Inside': A Qualitative Study on the Implications of Infertility on Women's Lives in Urban Gambia," *Reproductive health* 15, no. 1 (2018),

empowerment for mothers.³ Studies on Islamic canonical texts have found that both marriage and motherhood are considered important roles for women.⁴ Motherhood has not only been given tremendous social value, but it also has had a central place in Islamic jurisprudence. In the Qur'an, there are several verses in which both motherhood and parenthood are mentioned. Some of these verses highlight the difficulties of motherhood from the moment of conception to rearing and caring for the children after birth. For instance, the Qur'an states, 'their mother bore them in weakness upon weakness and their weaning was in two years' (Chapter 31: 14), highlighting the hardship in carrying children and providing a guideline for the breastfeeding period. Partly because of these hardships, children are invited to be kind to their parents; especially their mothers, 'we have enjoined on a person kindness to their parents; their mother bore them in pain, and she gave birth to them in pain.' (Chapter 46: 15).⁵

The emotional and physical struggles of motherhood are thus acknowledged in Islamic texts,⁶ and motherhood is discussed in relation to tasks such as birth giving, breastfeeding, and caring for the children in the Qur'an, and in much more detail in Islamic fiqh texts. In *hadith*, mothers are regarded highly, blessed and elevated. The Prophet of Islam, for instance, has famously stated, 'paradise lies at the feet of the mother'⁷ and the Qur'an has repeatedly invited Muslims to be kind and obedient towards their parents. It is, however, important to note that motherhood is not an essential or compulsory role for women in Islamic theology and law. A historical example to prove this is the case of the Prophet's wives whom – except one – did not bear any children for the Prophet.⁸ It is however notable that the Prophet's wives have still been symbolically referred to as the 'Mothers of Believers'. Assigning this title to the wives of the Prophet and later on to his daughter (to which I will return), highlight that despite the fact that most of

1-11. Kimiko Tanaka and Nan E. Johnson, "Childlessness and Mental Well-Being in a Global Context," *Journal of Family Issues* 37, no. 8 (2014), 1-19.

³ See for e.g. Anne E. Brodsky, "The Role of Religion in the Lives of Resilient, Urban, African American, Single Mothers," *Journal of Community Psychology* 28, no. 2 (2000), 199-219. Larissa Remennick, "Childless in the Land of Imperative Motherhood: Stigma and Coping among Infertile Israeli Women," *Sex Roles* 43, no. 11 (2000), 821-841.

⁴ Margaret Aziza Pappano and Dana M. Olwan, "Introduction: Muslim Mothering: Between Sacred Texts and Contemporary Practices," in *Muslim Mothering: Global Histories, Theories, and Practices* (Bradford: Demeter Press, 2016).; Aliah Schleifer, *Motherhood in Islam* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1996).; Judith Tucker, *Women, Family, and Gender in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Ladan Rahbari, "Marriage in Iran: Women Caught between Shi'i and State Law," *Electronic Journal of Islamic and Middle Eastern Law (EJIMEL)* 7 (2019).

⁵ I have compared and used translations from <http://corpus.quran.com/> but I have also applied my own reading by using a non-gendered form of translation. Many translations of the Qur'anic verses use male pronouns as the general form, even when referring to both male and female. I have instead used they/their/them pronouns for both singular and plural nouns.

⁶ Irene Oh, "Motherhood in Christianity and Islam: Critiques, Realities, and Possibilities," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38, no. 4 (2010), 638-653.

⁷ Oh, "Motherhood in Christianity and Islam", 645.

⁸ Ayesha S. Chaudhry, "Unlikely Motherhood in the Qur'an: Oncofertility as Devotion," *Cancer treatment and research* 156 (2010), 287-294.

them never became biological mothers, the social and symbolic importance of motherhood is still emphasized in their representations.⁹

The high value of motherhood is an established idea in Islam. Some Islamic traditions have advised against voluntary childlessness and marrying infertile women.¹⁰ Because of this, some scholars have discussed that it is not debatable that Islam is a pronatalist religion.¹¹ While contraceptives are not prohibited and procreation is not mandatory, Islam is interpreted to be pronatalist, and some Muslims believe that it is not advised by their religion to use contraceptive methods.¹² While this is in no way a common or popular belief in every Muslim context, some interpretations of Islamic scripture have indeed taken the matter so far as to claim that contraceptives are only allowed in case excessive fertility leads to proven health risks, or social and economic harm to the parents.¹³ This is against the mainstream belief that voluntary childlessness is not sinful. Although, in the early stages of the conversion to Islam in the seventh century there was a concern about reproducing the adherents and increasing the number of Muslims in the world, ranks of childless women were still present among prominent Muslim figures.¹⁴ The Prophet's wife Ayesha for instance, who is a significant female figure in Sunni Islam is a notable example of Muslim, and politically active women – within the Sunni tradition – who never bore any children. The Prophet did not divorce her or any of the other wives who were childless,¹⁵ but he did advise Muslim men to marry fertile women. In Shi'a Islam,¹⁶ Lady Fatemeh-Masoumeh of Qom is an *Imamzadeh*¹⁷ who never married or had children during her lifetime.¹⁸ She is nonetheless one of the most prominent women in Shi'i history and a highly respected historical and divine figure.

The question thus remains whether and how the Islamic tradition of associating a fundamental value with motherhood, affects the imagery of Muslim non-mothers. It is speculated that people with greater affiliation to Islam might have more negative attitudes toward remaining childless because of the discourses

⁹ Chaudhry, "Unlikely Motherhood in the Qur'ān", 287-294.

¹⁰ Myhammad Qasim Butt and Muhammad Sultan Shah, "An Overview of Islamic Teachings on Infertility," *Al-Adwa* 48, no. 32 (2019), 53-68.

¹¹ Nawal H. Ammar, "The Status of Childless Women in Islam: Issues of Social and Legal Construction," *Humanity & Society* 20, no. 3 (1996): 79.

¹² Carla Makhlouf Obermeyer, "Reproductive Choice in Islam: Gender and State in Iran and Tunisia," *Studies in Family Planning* (1994), 41-51.

¹³ Abdel-Rahim Omran, *Family Planning in the Legacy of Islam* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 60.

¹⁴ Ammar, "The Status of Childless Women in Islam: Issues of Social and Legal Construction.", 77-89

¹⁵ Ammar, "The Status of Childless Women in Islam", 81.

¹⁶ Shi'a is a branch of Islam that makes up to fifteen percent of all Muslims populations worldwide. While considered a global Muslim minority, Shi'a population is a dominant majority in Iran, and in majority in other countries including Bahrain, Iraq, and Azerbaijan.

¹⁷ Imamzadeh are children and close relatives of Shi'a Imams who are descendants of the Prophet of Islam.

¹⁸ In Shi'a narratives, *Imams* are the descendants of the Prophet and are considered the rightful spiritual and political leaders after the death of the Prophet by the Shi'a.

explained above.¹⁹ Childlessness in some Muslim contexts is indeed perceived as a God-given problem, and thus a test that can be resolved by God's will.²⁰ The social interpretations on Islam's viewpoints on childlessness and non-mothers however vary in different contexts. The variability in socioeconomic development in Muslim countries has also led to discrepancies in the social reality of women's autonomy in general, and regarding motherhood in particular, both between countries and within the same country, between different sectors of the population.²¹

My focus and interest in this article are to investigate representations, moral, social and theological views non-motherhood in Shi'a Islam by looking into the case of Lady Fatemeh-Masoumeh of Qom – hereafter called Masoumeh or Lady Masoumeh – as a highly venerated figure in Shi'a Islam. I will first introduce Lady Masoumeh, her life story and the significance of her narrative as a non-mother in Shi'a Islam. I will then focus on her story as a single non-mother and its representations in contemporary Shi'i cultural imaginary.

1. Brief Life Story of Lady Masoumeh

Lady Masoumeh of Qom, also called Fatemeh-Sughra (790-816 CE) was Imam Musa Kazem's (the seventh Twelver Shi'a Imam) daughter with his wife Najmeh. Najmeh was a former slave from North Africa who had become very learned in Islamic teachings. Imam Kazem and Najmeh had two children together, Masoumeh and Reza (766-818 CE; the eighth Twelver Imam succeeding his father). Masoumeh was born in the city of Medina. As a young child, her life was affected by her father's imprisonment by Abbasid caliphs and his eventual early death.²² She was then cared for by her brother Reza who was older than her by twenty-five years. In 815CE, Imam Reza was summoned from Medina to Khorasan by the Abbasid Caliph Ma'mun,²³ and he had to leave his sister behind. One year after her brother's migration, Masoumeh decided to join him in Khorasan. But her trip was not concluded as she died while she was on the way to Khorasan. While the conditions of her death are mostly unknown and it is widely believed that she died after falling ill, there are some speculations that she too, similar to her father and brother, was poisoned.²⁴ Her body lays in a shrine in one of the most significant sacred sites in Iran, in the city of Qom.

¹⁹ Shenel Husnu, "The Role of Ambivalent Sexism and Religiosity in Predicting Attitudes toward Childlessness in Muslim Undergraduate Students," *Sex Roles* 75, no. 11-12 (2016), 573-582.

²⁰ Merve Gökner, "Everyday Ontologies and Islam for Childless Women in Northwestern Turkey," *Contemporary Levant* 3, no. 1 (2018).

²¹ Carla Makhoul Obermeyer, "Reproductive Choice in Islam: Gender and State in Iran and Tunisia," *Studies in Family Planning* 25, no. 1 (1994): 42.

²² It is a Shi'i belief that all the Twelve Imams were martyred by political rivals. Imam Musa Kazem was poisoned to death by the order of Harun al-Rashid, the Abbasid Caliph.

²³ The summoning was because Ma'mun feared Reza's influence and the growth of Shi'i power, and wanted to keep a close eye on Imam Reza. The journey is thus considered an exile and forceful emigration by the Shia's. See e.g. Hyder Reza Zabeth, *Landmarks of Mashhad* (Mashhad: Islamic Research Foundation, 1999), 20.

²⁴ Mohammad Mehdi Eshtehardi, *Hazrat Masoumeh, the Second Fatima*, Qom (Akhlagh (in Farsi), 2001).

The city of Qom in Iran – referred to as the Shi'i Vatican²⁵ – is beside the city of Najaf in Iraq the contemporary center of the Twelver Shi'a branch of Islam. While in Shi'a, there is no central authority that dispenses a single interpretation of the faith,²⁶ the city of Qom has been home to many Shi'i theologians after the mid-seventeenth century.²⁷ This is when, under the reign of the Safavid Dynasty (1501-1722) Shi'a was established as the official religion of the Persian Safavid state.²⁸ The Safavid's Shi'i identity led to the reconstruction, renovation and expansion of the shrine. These projects were usually run by the order of noblewomen women. In 1519, Tajli Beigom, the Safavid queen – married to Shah Isma'il I, the founder of the Safavid Dynasty – ran the project to improve and expand the shrine's construction.²⁹

The laying place of Fatemeh-Masoumeh has partly been the reason behind Shi'a interest in the city and part of what gives the city its identity as sacred ground. The shrine is the second most important religious site in Iran, only after the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad.³⁰ Lady Masoumeh's arrival in Qom and it's becoming her final resting place is however not seen by Shi'a as an accident. There are several narratives and hadiths from Shi'i Imams that venerate Lady Masoumeh and her shrine in Qom even before her death. These hadith are believed to have predicted that the city of Qom would become the final destination of the Lady and a center of Shi'a theology.³¹ These predictions are not contingent to Masoumeh's story but part of the greater Shi'i belief in Imams as beings who existed before time itself was created; they were also infallible, and possessed divine wisdom that allowed them to predict future events.³² A hadith from Imam Sadegh (702-765 CE - sixth Shi'a Imam) has stated,

'A lady who is a descendant of me, by the name of Fatemeh, will be buried in Qom. Whoever visits her, will be rewarded entry to Heaven'
– Imam Sadegh.³³

The shrine of Lady Masoumeh is especially attractive for practicing Shi'i women. Officials in Iran have estimated that the shrine has twenty million pilgrims every

²⁵ David Blair, "Iran Elections: Little Choice for Voters in the 'Shia Vatican' Where Reformers Are Banned from Standing," Accessed 2 December 2020, from: <https://bit.ly/2y1bw97>

²⁶ Obermeyer, "Reproductive Choice in Islam: Gender and State in Iran and Tunisia," 42.

²⁷ Ladan Rahbari, "'Their Beastly Manner': Discourses of Non-Binary Gender and Sexuality in Shi'ite Safavid Persia," *Open Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018), 758-770.

²⁸ Shi'a was in fact the minority branch in Iran before the Safavids John Obert Voll, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), and the conversion of the country to Shi'a was a process that included violence and prosecution.

²⁹ Oghaf, "The Holy Shrine of Hazrat Masoumeh in Qom," <http://bit.ly/2PDPzC3>.

³⁰ Shirin Naef, *Kinship, Law and Religion: An Anthropological Study of Assisted Reproductive Technologies in Iran* (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2017).

³¹ YJC (Young Journalists' Club), "Predictions of Imam Sadegh About Qom and Reappearance of the Twelfth Imam," Accessed 9 October 2020, from: <https://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/5292059/>.

³² Mary Thurlkill, *Chosen among Women: Mary and Fatima in Medieval Christianity and Shi'ite Islam* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

³³ Majlesi's Bihar Al-Anwar series is estimated to have been edited between 1694-1698. Molla Mohammad-Baqer Majlesi, "Bihar Al-Anwar," 48 (online version): 317.

year.³⁴ Lady Masoumeh's life (and death) story, her personal characteristics, and political imagery make her a role model for Shi'a women, much like other Shi'a female figures such as Fatemeh-Zahra³⁵ and Zeinab.³⁶ In fact, Lady Masoumeh's position is often compared to that of Fatemeh-Zahra. Fatemeh-Zahra is revered as a saint and her unparalleled station within the pantheon of Shi'a can only be compared to that of Mary in Catholicism,³⁷ the mere fact that Lady Masoumeh's divinity comes close to that of Fatemeh-Zahra highlights her position in Shi'a belief. However, unlike Fatemeh-Zahra and Zeinab – both venerated for their political activism as well as their piety and motherhood – Lady Masoumeh did not get married and did not have any children. This makes her imagery different from that of Fatemeh-Zahra which is strongly tied to her position as the mother of the eleven Shi'a imams who are descended through her and Ali, the first Imam. Lady Masoumeh is the most prominent Shi'i female figure who was both single and a non-mother. With the great value associated with childbearing and motherhood in Islam, and the popular portrayal of religious figures in relation to their maternity, Lady Masoumeh's religious and cultural imagery has the potential to be fundamentally different from mainstream portrayals of female saints. I will explore this further in the following section.

2. Lady Masoumeh's Social and Political Imagery

To understand Lady Masoumeh's representation and imagery among the Shi'a, it is important to locate her character and life story within the greater Shi'i cultural and political history. Shi'i narratives are built around a collective sense of injustice, socio-political hardship, oppression and deprivation that according to the Shi'a start from the unjust deprivation of Imam Ali from his rightful position as the Islamic Caliph after the death of the Prophet. After Imam Ali's martyrdom, eleven Shi'i Imams – descendants of Imam Ali and Fatemeh-Zahra – proclaimed political and juristic Islamic authority as the descendants of the Prophet and his rightful successor, Ali. For their claim, many of Imams were imprisoned, tortured, exiled and killed by their political rivals.³⁸ This narrative of suffering peaks with the occurrence of the Battle of Karbala where Imam Hosayn (the third Twelver Shi'i Imam) and his companions were martyred. This narrative makes up an important part of Shi'i identity and all efforts are made to retell and remember it in the form of multiple rituals. The rituals around Shi'i figures are sometimes practiced in combination with pilgrimage where a physical or symbolic shrine or place of worship exists. In the

³⁴ Shabestan, "More Than Twenty Million Pilgrims to Hazrat Masoumeh," Accessed 14 December 2020, from: <http://shabestan.ir/detail/News/445560>.

³⁵ The prophet's daughter and first Imam's (Ali) wife.

³⁶ Zeinab was Imam Ali and Fatima-Zahra's daughter and sister to highly revered and martyred Imam Hosayn. Known as the Heroine of Karbala, Zeinab's Shrine is in Damascus-Syria and is an important site of pilgrimage to the Shi'a people.

³⁷ Frederic M Wehrey, *Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 106.

³⁸ Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa Al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987).

case of Lady Masoumeh, the location of the shrine in the heart of Shi'a activities in the city of Qom has facilitated the organization of collective commemorations. Like other saints and prominent figures, in the case of Lady Masoumeh, the birth and death/martyrdom periods attract most mourning rituals and celebrations.

The commemorations of Shi'i saints often entail ritual recitals where stories on their lives are told to the public. In songs and ritual recitals, Lady Masoumeh is often praised for her piety. In her commemorations, the ill-treatment of the Lady by the political anti-Shi'a forces of her time is also a recurring theme. In recitals, Lady Masoumeh is often called *mazloumeh* (i.e. ill-treated and repressed). Her loneliness in a foreign land (Iran) and her tragic and early death/martyrdom are remembered and mourned. For this, she is remembered as the *gharibeh* (i.e. someone who is away from their homeland). The commemorations also often involve stories of Lady Masoumeh having died alone, far from her beloved brother – Imam Reza. It must be noted that Lady Masoumeh was not entirely alone while travelling to Khorasan, and was in fact accompanied by a group of around twenty companions including her other brothers (from different mothers), nephews and nieces and servants during the journey.³⁹ The emphasis on her loneliness, sorrow and longing for her brother Imam Reza is thus indicative of the way her narrative has been retold and oriented towards highlighting the parts of her suffering that would exemplify the conditions of Shi'i people's lives under the repressive anti-Shi'a forces such as the Abbasid regime (750–1258).

To situate the contemporary imagery of Lady Masoumeh, it is important to understand the gender politics of the Shi'i contexts where she is revered and remembered. While the Lady's shrine is visited by pilgrims from all over the world, it is in Iran that Lady Masoumeh is both a national, and a religious Shi'i symbol. In 2007, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance of the Islamic Republic of Iran named the birthday of Lady Masoumeh – the first day of the Dhu al-Qadah month in the Islamic calendar (i.e. Lunar Hijri) – Girls' Day (*rooz-e dokhtar*).⁴⁰ The decision was made because Lady Masoumeh is considered the Islamic icon of girlhood, supposedly because of her virginity and singlehood, and in order to promote Islamic teachings and Lady Masoumeh's character as a role model for girls.⁴¹ This choice of naming is particularly interesting because of the value that has been given to marriage in Islam, and because of Iranian pronatalist regime's promotion of marriage and reproduction. The question thus arises on how the Iranian Shi'i authorities approach Masoumeh's singlehood and whether it is considered a valued path to be followed by Shi'i women.

³⁹ Mehrnews, "What Was the Reason for Hazrat Masoumeh's Travel to Iran and Qom?," <http://bit.ly/2SeJ2QX>.

⁴⁰ Irna, "Birthday of Hazrat Fatemeh Masoumeh and Girls' Day [in Farsi]," Accessed 22 November 2020, from: www.irna.ir/news/83380780/.

⁴¹ Iqna, "Investigating the Reasons for Naming Lady Masoumeh's Birthday as the Girls' Day," Accessed 24 November 2020, from: <http://bit.ly/31FEfel>.

Lady Masoumeh's imagery as a single and childless woman is built through different recounts of parts of her life story that seemingly explain why she did not get married. The most prominently cited reason for Lady Masoumeh's singlehood and consequently, her childlessness is considered to be the suppression of Shi'a populations during the Abbasid reign as a result of which no one dared to ask for her hand in marriage.⁴² Both the Umayyad period (661–750 CE) and the Abbasid period (750–1258) are known as times of oppression and hardship for the Shi'a⁴³ especially for the descendants of the Prophet – who had claims of being the legitimate Islamic rulers – and those closely related to them. This explanation is endorsed by the Shi'i seminaries in Iran.⁴⁴

A second explanation brought forth by scholars for Lady Masoumeh's singlehood is that her divine position was so high, that there were no men matching her at her time.⁴⁵ This explanation, however, deviates from mainstream trajectories of marriage and motherhood allocated to women in Islam. Lady Masoumeh is not the first Shi'i saint who is believed to be of unmatched divinity. A similar argument was made about Lady Fatemeh-Zahra's spiritual uniqueness in a hadith by Imam Sadegh:

*"If God had not created the Commander of the Faithful [Ali] for Fatemeh[-Zahra], then there would not have been a suitable husband for her in the whole world from the time of Adam to the end of mankind – Imam Sadegh."*⁴⁶

In line with the view, some argue that the same reasoning could be made in the case of Lady Masoumeh. The difference is however that in the case of Fatemeh-Zahra, a match did exist. Shi'a genealogy of Imams dates the creation of the Prophet, the Twelve Imams and Fatemeh-Zahra back to the creation of Adam, the first man.⁴⁷ Imams were in fact created as divine lights that were transferred into their earthly bodies.⁴⁸ This means that Ali and Fatemeh-Zahra's union that resulted in the Imamate⁴⁹ was already destined to take place even before they were born. Placed within this context, the hadith by Imam Sadegh seems to be highlighting the high levels of divine and spiritual compatibility of Fatemeh-Zahra and Ali, rather than

⁴² Hawzah, "One Look at Hazrat Masoumeh's Life," 3 December 2020, from: <https://hawzah.net/fa/Magazine/View/4180/5477/51709/>.

⁴³ Major Jean-Marc Pierre, Captain Edward Hutchinson, and Hassan Abdulrazak, "The Shi'a Awakening," *Military review* 87, no. 2 (2007). And Nematollah Safari and Zahra Bakhiari, "Cultural and Political Conditions During the Imamat of Imam Reza," *Seven Skies* 15, no. 59 (2013), 5-37.

⁴⁴ See e.g. Hawzah, "One Look at Hazrat Masoumeh's Life".

⁴⁵ Hawzah, "One Look at Hazrat Masoumeh's Life".

⁴⁶ Al-Islam, "The Biography of Lady Fatima Masuma," Accessed 12 January 2020, from: https://www.al-islam.org/lady-fatima-masuma-of-qum-masuma-jaffer/biography-lady-fatima-masuma#fref_08013c9b_42.

⁴⁷ See Karen G. Ruffle, "An Even Better Creation: The Role of Adam and Eve in Shi'i Narratives About Fatimah Al-Zahra," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 3 (2013), 791-819.

⁴⁸ Francis E Peters, *The Monotheists: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conflict and Competition, Volume II: The Words and Will of God* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁴⁹ Imamate is recognizing imams as successors of the Prophet and believing that they are descendants of Ali and Fatemeh-Zahra and chosen by God. See e.g. Vivienne SM Angeles, "The Development of the Shia Concept of the Imamate," *Asian Studies* 21 (1983), 145-160.

implying the possibility that Lady Fatemeh-Zahra would have stayed unmarried. Additionally, according to Shi'i scholars, the lack of a good match would not have been a viable justification for staying single as it contradicts the high value of marriage in Islam.^{50,51}

A third explanation for Lady Masoumeh's singlehood was suggested by historian Yaqubi (897-898 CE) who claimed that Lady Masoumeh refrained from marriage following his father, Imam Musa Kazem's will.⁵² Yaqubi's claim has been disqualified by Shi'a institutions in Iran who instead discuss that Imam Musa Kazem made his son Imam Reza the guardian for all his daughters. This means that rather than asking them not to get married, he instructed them to marry whom their brother Imam Reza approved and saw fit for them.⁵³

As seen in the three accounts around Lady Masoumeh's singlehood, contemporary narratives do not tend to consider that she might have been voluntarily single or even inclined to celibacy. It is also not considered that the Lady simply passed away at the very young age of twenty-eight years old. The very fact that so many speculations on reasons for her singlehood exist is indicative of Shi'i scholars' views on the appropriate age of marriage. Such accounts imply that the Lady should have been married by the age of twenty-eight had there not been some extraordinary circumstances that hindered her. The consequences of such reasoning are two-fold: by ignoring the possibility of the Lady's intent, the value of institutions of marriage and motherhood stays intact; and by focusing on the historical oppression of Shi'i as the reason behind Lady Masoumeh's life choices, the Lady is portrayed as the victim of adverse political discourses rather a woman who has made the choice to stay unmarried and childfree. By narrating her story in this way, Lady Masoumeh's imagery stays compliant with traditionalist gender politics that promote marriage and motherhood as the ultimate achievement for faithful Muslim women.⁵⁴ To be clear, it is possible that Lady Masoumeh did indeed desire marriage and motherhood, and that one/some/all of the three reasons presented to explain Lady Masoumeh's singlehood and childless/free-ness affected her life story and events. My argument is not that these narratives are flawed or impossible per se, but that the lack of attention to, or simply ignoring the possibility of agency, choice and intent is politically motivated.

⁵⁰ Besides the connotations of the importance of marriage in the Qur'an, according to several hadith, marriage is considered the tradition of the Prophet and voluntary singledom is looked down upon in Islam, "Marriage in the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet." Accessed 22 October 2019, from: <https://www.al-islam.org/religion-al-islam-and-marriage/marriage-quran-and-sunnah-prophet-s>

⁵¹ Somayyeh Hasheminejad et al., "Homogamy in Psychology and Its Comparison to the Concept of Kufwiyat," *Islam and Health Journal* 1, no. 3 (2014), 50-60.

⁵² Ahmad Yaqubi, *Tarikh Al-Yaqubi*, volume two (Tehran: Entesharat Elmi va Farhangi, 2003).

⁵³ Hawzah, "One Look at Hazrat Masoumeh's Life".

⁵⁴ Sabiha Hussain, "Motherhood and Female Identity: Experiences of Childless Women of Two Religious Communities in India," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 15, no. 3 (2009): 82.

3. Discussion: Can Lady Masoumeh's Non-Motherhood be Divine?

Prominent women in Islam have often been introduced as the perfect role models for Muslim woman⁵⁵ to some extent because of their relational position as wives, mothers, sisters and daughters of prominent male figures and saints. The imagery of Lady Masoumeh, in particular, is heavily reliant on her relationship to her father and brother, two of the Twelver Shi'i Imams. Based on the veneration of motherhood in Islam and the reverence of Muslim women's roles as mothers, religion has played a role in reinforcing the trope of sacrificial mother.⁵⁶ Partly because of this trope, in many Muslim communities, rejecting motherhood has become difficult for women. Using religious texts on the value of mothers, motherhood has also been naturalized.⁵⁷ In Shi'i Ijtihad, for instance, women are considered more responsible and more aligned than men— both physically and metaphysically—with reproductive labor, or the so-called “domestic” activities including caring for children.⁵⁸ This means that motherhood has gained a normative power that could prove socially harmful to women who are childfree or childless.

My focus and interest in this article have been to investigate representations, moral and theological contemporary imagery of non-motherhood in Shi'a Islam by looking into the case of Lady Fatemeh-Masoumeh of Qom as a highly venerated figure. Lady Masoumeh is the symbol of piety and resilience for Shi'i women and a national and religious figure in Iran, where her shrine is located. The social and political aspects of lady Masoumeh's imagery are often placed within the Shi'i narratives of discrimination and oppression. I showed that in the speculations around Lady Masoumeh's singlehood and childlessness, little space has been given to the possibility of agency and voluntarily choosing for singlehood, celibacy and childfree-ness. This means that (i) the value given to marriage and childbearing of women in Islam and Lady Masoumeh's position as a role model for Shi'i women have contributed to the way her story is historically narrated; and (ii) by explaining that the Lady was deprived of marriage and motherhood by anti-Shi'a political forces of her time, her story is employed to complement and reinforce the historical narratives of political oppression and hardship of the Shi'a. When placed within the Iranian pronatalist gender politics, it becomes clear that singlehood would hardly be considered an acceptable trajectory or promoted/prescribed for women. In recent years, the Iranian state has backed pronatalist policies that pushed for childbearing, early retirement for mothers, tax relief and benefits for larger families, and

⁵⁵ Susan Sered, “Rachel, Mary, and Fatima,” *Cultural Anthropology* 6, no. 2 (1991): 141.

⁵⁶ Oh, “Motherhood in Christianity and Islam: Critiques, Realities, and Possibilities.”; Ladan Rahbari, “Emotional Exchange, Discourse of Martyrdom and Self-Sacrifice: A Qualitative Study of Self-Sacrifice among Iran-Iraq War Widows” (paper presented at the Proceedings of the first international symposium on self-sacrifice and martyrdom: A scholarly approach (ISSMSA 2013), Tehran: Setaregan Foundation, 2013).

⁵⁷ See for e.g., Azam Noori and Hasan Poorkarimi, “Maternal Role in Quranic Teachings,” *Journal of Islamic Studies of Women and the Family (Jameat-Almostafa Alalamiya)* 2, no. 2 (2014), 71-92.

⁵⁸ Ladan Rahbari, “Women's Ijtihad and Lady Amin's Islamic Ethics on Womanhood and Motherhood,” *Religions* 11, no. 88 (2020): 8.

punishments for unauthorized birth control providers to boost reproduction.⁵⁹ In this context, in order to portray Lady Masoumeh as a role model, it has been considered essential for the identity of the state and its gender and biopolitics, that the Lady's story is told in a way to fit within the framework of the dominant discourses on femininity which "ordinarily" entail elements of marriage and motherhood.⁶⁰

When it comes to childless and childfree women and religious representations, it is important to note that although the Qur'an has given attention to childlessness and infertility within specific narratives, it has mostly remained silent regarding the consequences of childlessness for the identities of women in general. When brought up, childlessness is mostly discussed in relation to other issues such as polygamy. Additionally, women in the Qur'an have been described beyond their positions as wives and mothers and are presented as economic beings, faithful believers, refugees, queens, etc. indicating that their position goes beyond their roles as (non)mothers.⁶¹ This Qur'anic approach has given Muslim scholars the dynamic ability to adapt their interpretations to the socioeconomic and historic conditions of their contexts, and has also enabled communities to interpret childlessness and its position according to dominant discourses.⁶² As such, in some Muslim contexts, motherhood is idealized as women's achievement, associated with physical and psychological adequacy, maturity and even functionality.⁶³ Non-motherhood and childless/free-ness have been viewed as regretful, if not as a woman's flaw, shortcoming or poor decision-making.

Conclusion

This study based itself up on the conviction that demystifying the institution of motherhood in Islam in Muslim contexts where non-motherhood and childless/free-ness continue to be stigmatized is especially invaluable. The study focused on the imagery and symbolism of Lady Fatemeh-Masoumeh of Qom in Shi'a Islam. With this conscious scope, the study cannot be extended to analyze the narratives or narrative makings of and around other childless/free women in Islamic history. The study's analysis revealed that the politics of motherhood in Shi'a Islam and in Iran have majorly influenced the official and popular discourses around Lady Masoumeh's life, identity and character. This study's findings and analysis show that narratives around Muslim female role models, saints and prominent women should be re-explored and retold not only in relation to, but beyond their roles as wives and mothers.

⁵⁹ Ladan Rahbari, Chia Longman, and Gily Coene, "The Female Body as The Bearer of National Identity in Iran: A Critical Discourse Analysis of The Representation of Women's Bodies in Official Online Outlets", *Gender, Place & Culture* 26, no. 10 (2019): 3.

⁶⁰ "Milk Kinship and the Maternal Body in Shi'a Islam," *Open Theology* 6, no. 1 (2020), 43-53.

⁶¹ Ammar, "The Status of Childless Women in Islam: Issues of Social and Legal Construction," 80.

⁶² Ammar, "The Status of Childless Women in Islam", 80.

⁶³ Hussain, "Motherhood and Female Identity: Experiences of Childless Women of Two Religious Communities in India," 82.

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