

The Meaning of Grieving Following Husband Loss among Muslim Women in Surakarta: Covid-19 Context

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ABSTRACT

Grieving after losing a husband is a painful experience. This study aims to explore the meaning of grieving following the loss of a husband due to COVID-19 among Muslim women in Surakarta. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, with 4 Muslim women from the city of Surakarta as informants. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, and data analysis was conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The results of this study show that not all women interpret the death of their husbands as a purely sorrowful experience. In this study, the loss of a husband was interpreted as: (1) A decree of age from God; (2) A good death brings happiness even amidst grief; (3) The husband's death is a temporary separation. The conclusion of this study is that religiosity influences Muslim women's interpretation of the grieving process and fosters inner peace, happiness, hope, optimism, and wisdom.

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INTRODUCTION

This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in Surakarta. The devastating COVID-19 pandemic had an immense psychological impact. One of the groups deeply affected were women who lost their husbands. During the pandemic, the news of death was reported daily, with numbers reaching hundreds or even thousands (World Health Organization, 2022; Worldometer, 2022). The trend of grief worldwide and in Indonesia during 2021-2022 increased, peaking in July 2021. This demonstrates that the COVID-19 pandemic and the situations that came with it, including the loss of a husband, have influenced grief in society.

The death of a husband due to COVID-19 leaves deep sorrow for the wife left behind. Grieving due to the loss of a spouse is considered one of the most stressful life experiences. This was outlined by Holmes and Rahe in the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS), which assigns a score of 100, the highest stress value (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Grief itself is emotional paralysis, disbelief, anxiety over separation, despair, and loneliness experienced by someone after losing a loved one (Santrock, 2012). Papalia et al. defines grief as loss and adjustment caused by the death of someone who is considered close (Papalia et al., 2009).

There are five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). (Kessler, 2020) added a sixth stage after acceptance, which is finding meaning in grief. Both authors argue that the stages of grief do not necessarily occur in order, but instead progress as a cycle (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). It starts with the denial cycle at the beginning of the loss, followed by the acceptance cycle and the cycle of finding meaning.

There are differences between men and women in how they handle grief. Men tend to show prolonged sadness that gradually diminishes over time, while women display long-lasting sadness that often intensifies (Lundorff et al., 2020). LeRoy et al. (2019) also state that the more someone loves their spouse, the greater the sense of loss.

Initial grief data were collected through open-ended questionnaires from four research informants on February 14 and 15, 2022. All informants mentioned experiencing deep sadness. Informants who had been married for over 25 years expressed feelings of loss and loneliness, while those married for less than five years felt despair, especially regarding socioeconomic factors.

The grief of a wife who loses her husband during the COVID-19 pandemic differs from general grief. Grief due to COVID-19 significantly affects mental health (Joaquim et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2021). This is due to the compounding life pressures and the policies enacted to reduce the spread of COVID-19 (Goveas & Shear, 2020a). According to Grace (2021), the grieving situation during the pandemic increases the likelihood of depression. Eisma & Tamminga (2020) also note that grief during the pandemic exacerbates severe acute sadness. These psychological risk factors occur because of the sudden separation experienced, given that COVID-19 deaths can happen unexpectedly (Breen et al., 2021). From a social-religious perspective, grief over the death of a loved one due to COVID-19, which increases the risk of Complicated Grief (CG) and Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder (PCBD), is influenced by the absence of traditional burial rituals (Diolaiuti et al., 2021).

Grief can become lighter or heavier depending on the meaning a person ascribes to it. Meaning in life is a subjective sense that one's life makes sense, has purpose, and matters to others (King & Hicks, 2021). Factors that make life meaningful are widely available to most people - including good moods, engagement in social relationships, and having religious beliefs (King & Hicks, 2021). Yıldırım et al. (2021) mention that life meaning can be shaped by a person's religiosity and can improve coping with psychological issues such as stress and loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Schnell & Krampe (2020) note that life meaning can buffer stress during the COVID-19 period.

This research was conducted in Surakarta, Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world (World Population Review, 2021). Surakarta is known as a religious city. Historically, Surakarta was part of the Mataram Islamic Kingdom in the 15th century. The spread of Islam in Surakarta remains strong today, marked by the many Islamic studies held in mosques. The Muslim population in Surakarta is currently 466,807 (Badan Pusat Statistik Kota Surakarta, 2023).

Based on the above explanation, the aim of this study is to explore the meaning of grief following the loss of a husband due to COVID-19 among Muslim women in Surakarta. The research question to be

answered is: "What is the meaning of grief following the loss of a husband due to COVID-19 among Muslim women in Surakarta?"

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological study method. The research informants consist of 4 Muslim women, selected using purposive sampling to ensure alignment with the research objectives. The specific criteria for selecting informants are: (1) Muslim women over 18 years old, (2) Residing in Surakarta, Indonesia, (3) Have been in a marital relationship, (4) Lost a partner during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (5) Have not remarried after losing their partner. The data and characteristics of the research informants are:

Table 1. *Characteristics of research informants*

Initial	Age	Age of Marriage	Date of Husband Loss	Husband's Profession	Number of Children
SS	52 yo	27 y	July 2021	Islamic preacher (Da'i)	3
T	56 yo	29 y	July 2021	International company manager	6
S	43 yo	10 y	July 2021	Factory security guard	0
HK	30 yo	3 y	June 2021	Private sector employee	2

Data collection in this study was conducted through in-depth interviews. The interview guide included the following questions: (1) What do you think about the COVID-19 pandemic?; (2) How did you feel when you found out your husband was in critical condition?; (3) How did you feel after your husband's passing?; (4) How did you respond to your husband passing?. The data analysis technique used in this research is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Data validity was ensured through member checks.

RESULTS

The aim of this study is to explore the meaning of grief following the loss of a husband due to COVID-19 among Muslim women in Surakarta. The research question to be answered is: "What is the meaning of grief following the loss of a husband due to COVID-19 among Muslim women in Surakarta?".

The research findings on the meaning of grief are divided into four themes: (1) Death is a decree from God, (2) A good death brings happiness amidst the grieving experience, and (3) The husband's death is seen as a temporary separation, (4) The growth of hope, optimism, and wisdom.

First Meaning: Death is a decree from God, as can be seen in the statements listed in the following table:

Table 2. *The informants' statements describe death as a decree from God*

Informant	Statements
SS	"I have good faith in Allah, that's what strengthens me. Nothing is destined unless we are capable of facing it" (152-154)

T	"Ustadz has completed his mission, me believe in Allah, it's enough" (156)
	"I always think that Allah must have prepared me to accept this" (263-265)
	"In my opinion, this is part of Allah's guidance for me" (559-560)
	"O Allah, everything belongs to You, it is Your will, and I accept (redha)" (336-337)
S	"O Allah, everything belongs to You, whenever You decide to take it, we have no right to object, I accept" (588-589)
	"O Allah, I accept. We have no right to complain, question, or blame" (596-597)
	"Allah's decision is indeed the best, that's it" (141)
	"Allah never makes mistakes in His decrees" (225-226)
HK	"In the end, we will all return to Allah" (239-240)
	"I just surrender to Allah... Allah determines everything now, it's up to Him. Whatever happens to my husband, I can only surrender" (168-172)

Second Meaning: A Good Death Brings Inner Peace and Happiness, as can be seen in the statements listed in the following table:

Table 3. *The informants' statements describe a good death as one that brings inner peace and happiness*

Informant	Statements
SS	"He just arrived (from the third wife), so after Maghrib and Isha prayers, he was gone" (122) "Abi (husband) performed Isha prayer. He prayed with combined intentions... I felt like there was still movement on his back, rising and falling, like he was still breathing, but it was strange since he had been panting heavily, and suddenly it was calm" (132-138)
T	"After that, Abi loudly said his final words, 'Assalamu'alaikum.' So now I perceive that perhaps a group (of angels) had arrived. The nurse went out, but someone else came in. His last words were loud, saying 'Assalamu'alaikum'... Then I jumped up, laying on the couch, and he said 'La ilaha illallah' during the process" (244-250)
S	"I felt a sense of peace, seeing Abi leave in such a good condition" (338) "And I saw him smiling at the moment he passed. Even though I wasn't there with him, many people were mourning, which made me feel at peace" (585-589) "He passed away on a Friday, still within Friday's blessings. My husband was a good man, and I believe that. When my husband passed, many people mourned his loss" (548-550)

Third Meaning: The husband's death is a temporary separation, as can be seen in the statements listed in the following table:

Table 4. *The informants' statements describe the husband's death as a temporary separation*

Informant	Statements
SS	"Hopefully, Allah will reunite us in His paradise... If Abi had left behind a charity, we must be part of it, because our hope is to be reunited in Allah's Jannah" (337-349)
T	"Before, we were afraid of death, but now, after seeing Abi, I'm not. We'll meet Abi again in the afterlife, as it's said that believers will be welcomed by those who have passed. So now it's time to continue doing good so we can reunite" (569-573) "...Now it's time to continue doing good so we can reunite again later" (572-573)
S	"In the end, we will all return to Allah" (239-240)

Fourth Meaning: The growth of hope, optimism, and wisdom, as can be seen in the statements listed in the following table:

Table 5. *The growth of hope, optimism, and wisdom*

Informant	Statements
SS	<p>"I get motivated again when I remember that this is an opportunity for me to continue the good deeds I did with Abi before, and I've carried on as much as I can until now..." (325-327)</p> <p>"...yeah, just the thought that his dreams were many and grand, and I must contribute to them..." (332-334)</p> <p>"...since the end of the year, even when we texted, he was like that, may Allah reunite us in His paradise someday..." (336-338)</p> <p>"...so his hopes and desires in spreading the message (dakwah) are what he considered the most important to fight for..." (518-520)</p> <p>"In my opinion, this is part of Allah's guidance for me" (559-560)</p>
T	<p>"...it's already clear what Abi liked and what would make him pleased if I did it, that also strengthens me. He never liked it if I became weak; Abi always preferred me to survive..." (414-416)</p> <p>"...I just continue what Abi started, and that's why I give charity in Abi's or Bani Rafar's name so that we all benefit from it..." (521-524)</p> <p>"...for Palestine, Abi could never be absent. He always had to act quickly..." (553-554)</p>
S	<p>"...it's a way of saying, 'Oh, it turns out I'm needed; I'm providing benefit to others'..." (441-442)</p> <p>"I give benefit to others by teaching. I don't have children, but I use some of my husband's BPJS (health insurance) pension to help others" (558-561)</p> <p>"...going forward, I have to think about how to continue being beneficial to others..." (655-656)</p>
HK	<p>"I want to teach my children, especially in terms of faith... My two boys, raising them is a heavy responsibility" (452-454)</p>

DISCUSSION

This study aims to explore the meaning of grief following the loss of a husband due to COVID-19 among Muslim women in Surakarta. The research question to be answered is: "What is the meaning of grief following the loss of a husband due to COVID-19 among Muslim women in Surakarta?"

The meaning of grief following husband loss among Muslim women is based on religious values. This aligns with one of the factors that influence this interpretation: religious belief (King & Hicks, 2021; Yıldırım et al., 2021). **First**, Muslim women interpret the death of their husbands as God's decree. This was expressed by all the informants: SS, T, S, and HK. This interpretation stems from the Islamic worldview, which explains that every event in the world is part of God's decree, including both good and bad occurrences. This is consistent with the sixth pillar of faith, which is belief in both good and bad predestination (Al-Utsaimin, 2017). From this perspective, Muslim women view the death of their husbands as a decree that cannot be hastened or delayed. Al-Utsaimin (2017) also mentions in a hadith that every person's provision, lifespan, and both good and bad fate are determined at 120 days in the womb. This makes it easier for them to accept their husbands' deaths, as mentioned by all the informants. Informant SS also believes that every event, whether good or bad, will undoubtedly bring wisdom.

Second, the meaning of a good death brings peace of mind and happiness to the informants, even in the midst of their grief. Informant T feels happy because of the circumstances surrounding her husband's death, which amazed her. T explained that the entire process of her husband's passing took only about two minutes. It began with him giving a greeting (*Assalamu 'alaikum*), as if he saw someone entering the room (possibly the angel of death or *Malakul Maut*). Shortly after, he recited the Shahada (*Laa ilaha illallah*) and then closed his eyes forever. From an Islamic perspective, this is the type of death that every believer desires.

In an interview, T also shared that her husband had consistently performed obligatory and Sunnah prayers throughout his life, read one juz of the Qur'an daily, fasted on Mondays and Thursdays, spent his wealth to support the family and donated to the Land of Shaam (Palestine and surrounding areas) and those in need. He refrained from zina (adultery), despite holding a high position in an international company. He also taught the Qur'an to company employees who were new to Islam, completed the Qur'an seven times during Ramadan, and constantly reminded his children to pray, recite dhikr every morning and evening, and read the Qur'an. These qualities reflect the characteristics of true believers (*Mu'minin*) and pious individuals (*Muttaqin*), as described in Qur'an Surah Al-Baqarah: 2-5 and Surah Al-Mu'minun: 1-11. T further mentioned that her husband performed Wudhu after realizing that his oxygen saturation had dropped to 0%. According to Mahmoud et al. (2022), performing Wudhu and facing the Qibla are acts of preparedness for a good death in Islam.

Informant SS also felt that her husband's death was a good death, which brought her peace amidst her grief. It is known that SS's husband was a Da'i who spread Islamic knowledge from one mosque to another. He also taught Islamic values to his family by always involving them in his preaching activities. According to SS, her husband's death marked the end of his responsibilities as a servant of Allah and as a Da'i, and those responsibilities should now be carried on by SS and their children. SS's husband also practiced polygamy with three wives and strived to treat all of them fairly until the end of his life. SS shared that her husband was first cared for by his second and third wives, and then by SS (the first wife) until he passed away.

Informant S also felt peace and happiness because she interpreted her husband's death as a good death. S's husband passed away on a Friday with a smile on his face. The meaning of her husband's good death, according to S, is because her husband was a good person. He worked as a security guard at a company and never missed performing congregational prayers. He had good relationships with family, friends, and neighbors. It is also known that her husband was someone who easily forgave others' mistakes.

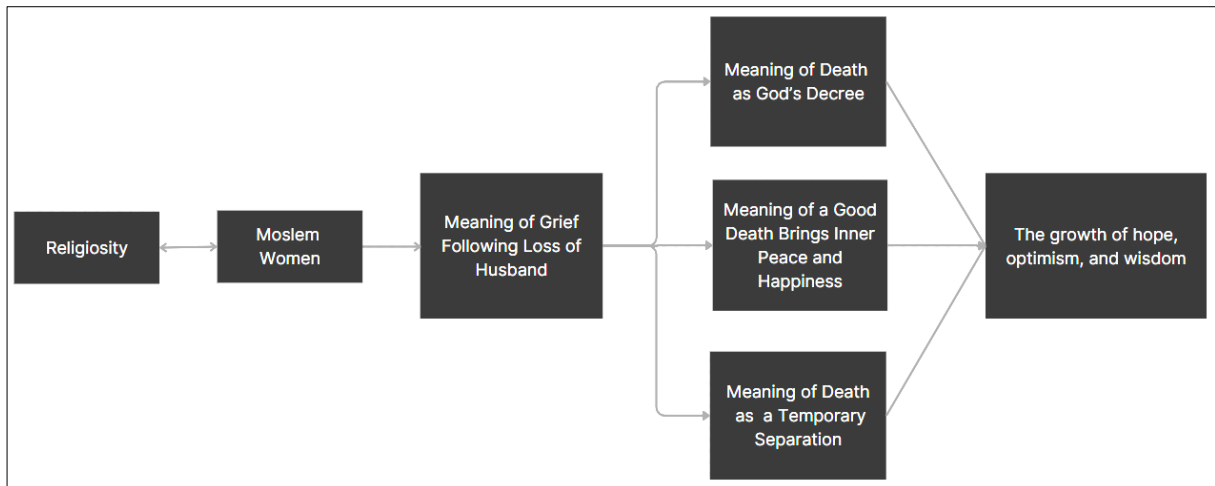
In the Islamic perspective, a good death is known as *Husnul Khatimah*. *Husnul Khatimah* is considered the pinnacle of success in this world. A person who attains it is someone who possesses *Iman* (faith), *Taqwa* (piety), and righteous deeds (*Amal Shalih*). From an Islamic, a person who achieves *Husnul Khatimah* has a healthy heart (*Qalbun Salim*) and a tranquil soul (*Nafsul Muthmainnah*) (Farid, 2021). *Husnul Khatimah* is also a sign that a person's deeds during their life were good, resulting in Allah's pleasure. Allah says in the Holy Qur'an, Surah Al-Fajr: 27-30, which means: "O tranquil soul (27), Return to your Lord well-pleased and pleasing (28), So enter among My servants (29), And enter My Paradise (30)" (Al-Qur'an, 2015).

Third, meaning of death as a temporary separation. The death of a husband is not the end of everything. As stated by informants SS and T, the passing of their husbands in a good condition has inspired them to do more good deeds. Both believe that the only way to reunite with their husbands in the afterlife is by continuing and exemplifying the good deeds their husbands practiced. They also pass on these values to their children, so that their family can be fully reunited in paradise. Similarly, informants S and HK hold the same belief. Informant S continues her husband's good deeds, despite not having children. Informant HK, on the other hand, teaches religious knowledge and faith to guide her children.

For many people, death is a journey into the unknown that they must travel alone, which causes pain and feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and despair (Jahangir & Hamid, 2022). Death for a Muslim is a passage between two continuous dimensions of life. The informants did not experience complex mental health issues. This contrasts with what we outlined in the background of the study, where the death of a husband during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted mental health and increased the risk of Complicated Grief (CG) and Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder (PCBD) (Diolaiuti et al., 2021; Goveas & Shear, 2020b; Joaquim et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2021).

Fourth, the growth of hope, optimism, and wisdom. Although the feeling of grief still exists and is relatively persistent, meaning based on a religious perspective helps the informants continually find hope, optimism, and wisdom behind the passing of their husbands. The hopes, optimism, and wisdom expressed by the four informants are: reuniting in the afterlife, continuing their husbands' preaching and good deeds, spreading kindness as their husbands did, and instilling faith and religion in their children. Kessler (2020) emphasizes that rediscovering hope and having optimism about the future can help someone move beyond the grieving process. Below, we present an figure illustrating how Muslim women interpret grief after losing a husband and its impact on their mental state:

Figure 1. *The meaning of grief following the husband loss among Muslim women*



CONCLUSION

The aim of this study is to explore the meaning of grief following the loss of a husband due to COVID-19 among Muslim women in Surakarta. The meaning of grief following the loss of a husband is influenced by the religiosity of Muslim women. There are at least three interpretations held by Muslim women: that death is God's decree, that death brings a sense of peace and comfort in grief, and that death is not the end or a permanent separation, as Muslims who have faith and perform righteous deeds will be reunited in the afterlife. This interpretation makes the growth of hope, optimism, and wisdom in the grief period.

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Ethics statement

This study has obtained ethical approval from the Faculty of Medicine Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta as a requirement for writing a thesis and final project.

Authors contribution

Fat Chiya Nidaul Chusna is the principal researcher, with Taufik as the supervisor. Ahmad Faqihuddin serves as the research assistant.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

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