

# Accidental Martyrs: The Representation of Martyrdom in the Fiction of Sahar Khalifeh

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This paper presents research on the figure of the martyr, and examines how the martyr can be understood in non-hegemonic ways through its fictional representation in two novels by Sahar Khalifeh – *End of Spring* and *Wild Thorns*. Sahar Khalifeh's novels often focus on gendered and colonial violence in the Occupied Territories of Palestine. The research problem I have identified is that the common discourses that pervade current research on the topic, which are the security discourse, religious discourse, and the human rights discourse, tend to frame the figure of the martyr with fixed pragmatic meanings. The objective of my research is to identify how fictional accounts of martyrdom construct alternative, non-hegemonic meanings for the figure of the martyr obliterated by these dominant discourses. My methodology is etymological analysis and textual analysis. By examining the etymological origins of the Greek-derived English word martyrdom as well as the Arabic term for the martyr, *shahid*, I have found that martyrdom is tied to the concepts of witness and survival. In Khalifeh's novels the Islamic concept of *al subr* – patient endurance and steadfastness – is infused with a communal political meaning framed by the ethical imperative of survival. In Khalifeh's fictional accounts of martyrdom, the martyr is someone who guarantees a "virtual" survival of the community that transcends the immediate concern for individual bodily safety. Accidental, unintentional identifications with others often lead Khalifeh's characters to commit unplanned acts of violence that are retroactively named as martyrdom. My finding is that this "accidental nature" of the acts of violence and their subsequent arbitrary naming situate violence beyond the utilitarian role ascribed to it. Another key finding of this research is that the appearance of the martyr figures in social movements often signal a political and ethical crisis. Khalifeh's protagonists respond to this crisis by turning death into something that transcends sheer dogmatism by introducing an identification with another being in a spontaneous and accidental moment of solidarity that is simultaneously undercut by the ironic reality of death. My final conclusion is that the martyr is a paradoxical figure between death and survival, which is irreducible to mere strategic and/or fundamentalist concerns.