



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN  
RELATED TO THE HEZBOLLAH'S MARTYRS IN THE  
SOUTHERN SUBURB OF BEIRUT (*AL-DAHIYA*)

by  
RAYANE MOHAMMAD AL-RAMMAL

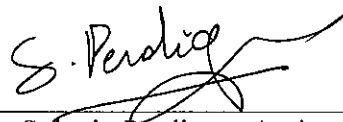
A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
to the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies  
of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences  
at the American University of Beirut

Beirut, Lebanon  
December 2019

THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN  
RELATED TO THE HEZBOLLAH'S MARTYRS IN THE  
SOUTHERN SUBURB OF BEIRUT *AL-DAHIYA*

by  
RAYANE MOHAMMAD AL-RAMMAL

Approved by:



---

Dr. Sylvain Perdigon, Assistant Professor  
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies

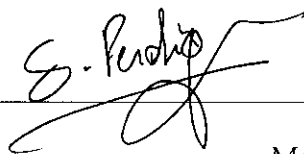
Advisor

On behalf of Dr. Scheid

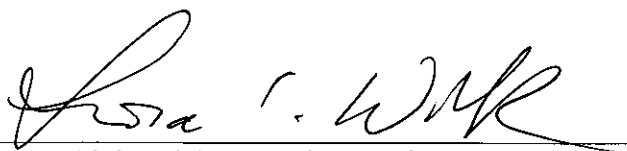
---

Dr. Kirsten Scheid, Associate Professor

Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies



Member of Committee



---

Dr. Livia Wick, Associate Professor

Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies

Member of  
Committee



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks are for Dr. Sylvain Perdigon for his patient help and rigorous guidance, without which this work would not have been done. I also thank Dr. Kirsten Scheid and Dr. Livia Wick for their great assistance and amazing encouragement and support since my admission into the Anthropology program. All three professors mentored me not only on how to become a better anthropologist, but a better person as well.

My recognition and gratitude are addressed to my interlocutors who generously opened both their homes and their hearts to me.

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Rayane Mohammad Al-Rammal for Master of Arts  
Major: Anthropology

Title: The Social and Cultural Experiences of Women Related to The Hezbollah's martyrs in the Southern Suburb of Beirut (Al-Dahiya).

Three main assumptions prevail when the subject of how women who lost their loved ones: their sons, fathers and husbands or husbands-to- be fighting with Hezbollah, deal with their pain of grief, is brought into discussion. It is often presumed by some outsider observers that these women are traumatized, indoctrinated and brainwashed and that they are all the same. These assumptions are chiefly driven by the liberal dogma dictating that it is 'uncivilized' to embrace pain, rendering the hope these women find in the martyrdom of their dear ones profoundly unacceptable. Having a free self, we hear the liberal voices saying, does not entail the option of choosing death over life, nor gracefully welcoming the annihilation of someone we care about. I intend to investigate in this thesis to which extent these accounts are misguided, by trying to ethnographically capture the voices of these women, the complexity of their social worlds and the grief tensions of conflicting emotions, namely between contentment and grief, between worldliness and otherworldliness and between the individualizing and the collectivizing of grief. I am intending to show how a specific conception of death as martyrdom shifts the way one sees and respond to one aspect of the human life that it is primarily thought of as universal: death.

## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	v
ABSTRACT.....	vi
ILLUSTRATIONS .....	ix
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Background .....	5
A Vignette from Damascus.....	5
A Vignette from Al-Dahiya .....	8
What is the connection between Al-Dahiya and Hezbollah? .....	11
A divine death and some tensions .....	18
Chapter	
I. THE TENSION BETWEEN CONTENTMENT ( <i>ar-riḍā</i> ) AND GRIEF.....	22
II. THE TENSION BETWEEN WORLDLINESS AND OTHERWORLDINESS.....	47
The Continuous Relationship to the Martyrs .....	49
Visitational Dream-Visions of the Martyrs.....	52
Bearing Witness to Martyrdom.....	59
Asmaa’s Story.....	59
A first Visit.....	60
Lost and never found.....	61
Bearing of the legacy of the martyrs .....	67
Sarah’s story.....	68
Allah’s Plan.....	71
“How can I practically come back to al-dunyā”?.....	73
“How can I become a martyr (shahīd) myself?” .....	78
Zahraa’s story.....	80
A brother as a refuge .....	82
I envy my brother .....	85
Al- dunyā- dunyā and al-dunyā- ’ākhira .....	89

<b>III. THE TENSION BETWEEN THE COLLECTIVATIZATION AND THE IRREDUCIBLE PRIVACY OF ONE’S GRIEF</b> .....	91
Inspiration (‘ <i>istilhām</i> ).....	93
Emulation (‘ <i>iḥtidā</i> ’) and divine forbearance ( <i>taṣabbur</i> ).....	102
Consolation for Sayyida Zaynabe and for the other women.....	108
<b>IV. “MY HEART IS BLACK” CAN A GRIEVING VOICE ENDOW A CULTURE WITH A SOUL?</b> .....	115
“Voice as Birth of Culture” .....	116
Antigone and Sayyida Zaynabe .....	119
A Contested Grief Narrative .....	121
Safiyya’s Story.....	123
Reflections.....	133
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	135
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	138



## ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1: Two pictures from the graveyard where I met the bereaved Damascene woman next to the shrine of Sayyida Zaynabe in Damascus, Syria. Photo credit: Unknown .....	7
2: The hrīseh making in Al-Dahiya in Ashura (September, 2019) Photo credit: Aline Androun .....	11
3: Women in the Ashura commemoration in Al-Dahiya (September, 2019) Photo credit: Aline Androun. ....	16
4: Fatima .....	26
5: Al-Imam Al-Mahdi's scouts in the commemoration of Ashura in Al-Dahiya (September 2019) Photo Credit: Aline Androun).....	30
6: Al-Imam Al-Husayn in a Dream. Painter: Unknown. ....	52
7: Rawḍat As-shahīdeen, one of the official graveyards of the Hezbollah's martyrs in Al-Dahiya. Photo credit: Aline Androun.....	81
8: From the commemoration of Ashura in Al-Dahiya (September 2019, Photo Credit: Aline Androun).....	97
9: A mother of two martyrs in the Ashura March in Al-Dahiya (September 2019, Photo Credit: Aline Androun).....	110
10: Antigone with Polynices' Body, Painting by Sebastien Norblin. ....	120
11: Sayyida Zaynabe with Imam Al-Husain's Body, Painter: Unknown. ....	120

## INTRODUCTION

With the recent and controversial engagement of Hezbollah in the Syrian War (2011- 2019), martyrdom came again to the surface in the Southern Suburb of Beirut (also known as Al-Dahiya). Hundreds of dead Hezbollah fighters left behind them broken hearts and renewed hopes, within their community, after the liberation of the East Northern Lebanese borders from ISIS' attacks back in 2016. Majorly Lebanese Shia, these families regard the death of their men affiliated with Hezbollah as martyrdom. The word martyr (*shahīd*) is used to speak of them. Their bodies are not washed or shrouded, as requested usually in the Islamic tradition for regular deaths, since the martyrs bodies are thought to be pure, and in order to “leave the martyrdom marks on their bodies” and because “angels will wash their bodies in the skies” (Al-Albani, 1995). Their photographs are printed on colorful posters instead of the usual black and white death declarations. Rice and flower petals are thrown on their coffins as if they were bridegrooms, and they are buried accompanied by the sounds of ululating women. Within this community's context, this death is primarily viewed as aligned with the martyrdom of the prince of martyrs “Imam Husayn”, and as a continuation of the religious and political project of the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979). However, a major share of this categorization of death as martyrdom falls socially on the women related to the martyrs. From then on, they must govern their lives differently from what it used to be. A reference to the resilience (*al-muqāwama*), fidelity (*al-'ikhlāṣ*) and patience (*as-ṣabr /taṣabbur*) of these women, the mothers/sisters/wives/daughters of the martyrs, is a recurrent theme in the discourses of Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, the

Secretary General of Hezbollah. When being interviewed by Al-Manar Channel<sup>1</sup>, these women insist on claiming their pain as their own while expressing emotions of pride and blessedness because Allah chose their men for such an honorable death.

It is not rare to read reports by outsiders about these deaths, these dead and their female relatives, which abide by secular assumptions and move back and forth between two (sometimes interlaced) discourses. The first one is a discourse of traumatization: surely, these women must be suffering from a certain form of trauma, and the social world in which they are embedded, the collective appropriation of their loss, makes it impossible for them to recognize their traumatic loss and heal from it. The second one is a discourse of collective piety: it must be the collective discourse and rituals of martyrdom that allow these women to overcome their grief with such apparent ease, in a manner that is not available in secular contexts. Both these discourses frame the topic in a manner that closes down, instead of opening up, the possibility of inquiring into these women's experiences and the manner in which they make sense of it.

My project seeks to complicate the picture by moving beyond this alternative toward a thicker description of the social worlds in which these women find themselves, and at the same time, contribute to create. A key element to their way of grieving is their continuous relation to the martyr. Even brief conversations with such female survivors of male martyrs will quickly reveal that for them, maintaining a relation with the "dead" martyr is hardly a distraction from the world and its realities. Rather, it comes to constitute in itself a way of being in the world: a call for the reform of the self, a political awareness, and a correct religious practice. Many say that it is a form of

---

<sup>1</sup> The official TV channel of Hezbollah.

“*jihād*” or striving. The continuous relation with the martyr is not a way of numbing one’s pain; on the contrary, it is akin to an experiment in the technique of awakening which connects this ephemeral world — *al-dunyā*<sup>2</sup> — to the other and what is thought of as the real one — *al’-ākhirā*<sup>3</sup>. The martyr in this way comes to play the role of a mediator and translator of the ethical imperatives from an Elsewhere. And being barred by the tradition from following a similar path, from being martyrs themselves, these women find themselves in front of new ways of self-actualization and of practicing piety (Mahmood, 2005), namely disciplining their bodies and calibrating their emotions in new ways in order to embody the right way to grieve and to carry the legacy of the martyr. However, I hypothesized on the basis of previous contacts with women in such positions that the very same resource on which they are invited in order to give form and direction to the work of grief and mourning, namely, the emulation of Ahl Al-Bayt<sup>4</sup> and especially during and after the events of Ashura, also exposes them to three pairs of tensions at various junctures of their lives between two poles.

A first one is a tension between the conflicting emotions regarding the martyrdom, notably grief (the grief of loss) and contentment (for the invaluable path granted to their male relatives). How to show one’s pride and gratefulness in enduring

---

<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, I will consistently use (*al-dunyā*) to refer to this world and its earthly concerns, as it is used by my interlocutors. In Arabic, the literal meaning of (*al-dunyā*) is the lower and the in the Islamic tradition the life on Earth was named as such because of its low status (and its ephemerality) in the eyes of God.

<sup>3</sup> In this thesis, I will use (*al’-ākhirā*) hereafter. (The Arabic literal meaning of (*al’-ākhirā*) is the last one).

<sup>4</sup>In the community, Ahl Al-Bayt refer specifically to “Ahl Al-Kisa” all related to the Prophet Mohammad (namely his cousin Ali Ibn abu Talib: The Prophet’s cousin and his son in-law, Fatima: Prophet Mohammad’s daughter and wife of Ali, and Hasan and Husayn their sons). Sometimes, when my interlocutors use “Ahl Al-Bayt” they refer to all the descendants of the Prophet Mohammad from his daughter Fatima.

pain in the manner that the tradition values the most, while at the same time living the sorrow of losing someone dear? To put it bluntly, should one be sad? Or should one be joyful? And how? When is sad too sad, sad in a manner that could cast doubt on one's gratitude to God? The second tension follows from the ambiguous state of the martyr, who according to the tradition is not alive any longer, but who is also not dead, and thus occupies a space of "in-betweenness" (Mittermaier, 2010). These women find themselves trapped in a world that their male relative has left, where they must carry on living, while at the same time, being still in a relation with the martyr in the hereafter, they should detach themselves from the world, withdraw from it and much of what it has to offer, and lead a quasi-ascetic life. So how can one calibrate adequately between being in *al-dunyā*, which is necessary to carry and embody the martyr's legacy, and being out of it at the same time? I am formulating this as a tension between the imperative to be worldly and the otherworldliness attached to their position. Finally, the third and last tension is one between the collectivization versus irreducible privacy of one's grief. The martyr, in a real sense, belongs to the whole community, and women in their position must consent to align their grief with the shared discourses and interpretations of a collective story. How do these women feel about collectivizing their grief? Veena Das in her article "Voice as birth of culture" (Das, 1995) examines the position of voice, of the uniqueness of being, as standing beside culture: "The weaving of voice into the everyday concerns of cultural meaning enables us to see a kind of healing that allows the 'souling' of culture." Can loss when it is shared still acknowledge the uniqueness, or unsubstitutability, of the being one lost?

My interlocutors often express feeling offended upon hearing the aforementioned discourse of them either being traumatized by their pain or

indoctrinated by the party. I believe that it is so, precisely because of the considerable effort they employ in navigating these tensions in the everyday, especially in the paradoxical absence of a clear consensus on how such tensions or ambiguities internal to their positions are to be resolved. It also means, however, that these tensions open up for them a potential space of creative self-actualization.

An anthropological engagement with the process of grief that the women related to Hezbollah martyrs go through is one has important ethical and political implications, especially at a time when this process itself becomes greatly flattened and misunderstood by some outsider viewers. In this work, I offer an invitation to rethink grieving in and through anthropology: by tracing the different tensions revolving around it, while at the same time calling for a serious engagement with the ways in which the discourses and interpretations related to martyrdom matter in people's everyday lives.

Far from trying to capture a uniform picture of how these women live their grief, my thesis will attempt to use heuristically the tensions I just sketched as lenses into the complicated, messy, and ongoing negotiation and remaking of categories such as gender, martyrdom, resistance and Islam in al-Dahiya at the current historical juncture.

## **Background**

### ***A Vignette from Damascus***

*Two summers ago, I visited Syria for the first time in six years, since the beginning of the war in 2011. I stopped at the neighborhood of Sayyida Zaynabe's shrine in the popular crowded colorful souks. To my surprise, I came across a graveyard just like the one where my grandfather is buried in Kaskas with the same*

*white marble over each grave. The older ones are decorated with artificial blue and red roses, the newer ones, with wild myrtle, palm leaves and some pale jasmine bouquets. And just like the graveyard in Beirut, I could smell the aloes wood and see the very old graves where the writings have long been erased. However, a large space on the right of the graveyard's entrance was unusually decorated. The plants on each grave were fresh, dew with colorful flowers, mostly yellow and rosewood. As I leisurely walked toward this section, I started to detect a pattern. On each of these graves was a photo of a man wearing his battledress and holding his shotgun. One additional line was added to the usual Islamic writing on the white marble: "This martyr died defending Sayyida Zaynabe's shrine in the Holy Defense".*

*I was not alone. An old woman in her fifties wearing a black abaya was there. She looked like most of the women her age in my community in al-Dahiya. She was watering the plantation of a whole line of graves, but I noticed that she kept sprinkling one in particular while whispering some verses of the Qur'an. I approached her quietly till I faced the grave where she was standing and started to read al-Fatiha. I heard her murmuring while pointing simultaneously south towards the golden dome of Sayyida Zaynabe's shrine, "he died two years ago defending this shrine". She seemed taken away by an immense sorrow so I did not ask her who "he" was, but I figured out that it must have been her son. I tried to come closer to where she was standing, and while I was looking at the same dome, a deep heaviness in my heart urged me to ask: "Does it fade with time, your pain?" She burst into tears and answered with a choked voice: "It never fades habibti! Oh! Only God knows that it deepens every day".*

*I was stunned. Never have I heard a mother of a Hezbollah martyr, back in al-Dahiya that was my home for twenty years, express her loss with such bitterness and*

*grief as this Syrian bereaved mother did; not even in the private gatherings or inside the closed religious/political lessons I used to take with the official Pedagogical Organization of Hezbollah (Al- Taabia Al-tarbawiyya), nor in my frequent visits to al-Qua'im, the famous "Hezbollah's mosque" where I used to participate in girls scouts activities as a child, where no media was there to perform for, nor a stranger to impress.*



*Figure 1: Two pictures from the graveyard where I met the bereaved Damascene woman next to the shrine of Sayyida Zaynabe in Damascus, Syria. Photo credit: Unknown*



This encounter with this bereaved mother coincided with the beginning of my Anthropology studies. I was shocked to learn how much I am used to hearing only one discourse related to the grief over those who are considered to be martyrs. This encounter, complemented by my studies, turned my attention into those aspects of my everyday life in Al-Dahiya that I repeatedly took for granted. For example, I never noticed before how I never heard a woman related to a Hezbollah's martyr use the verb "die" to describe his death. "*He fell as a martyr ('istashhada)*" is what I am used to hearing. And as I explained in the vignette, I am also not used to hearing this tone that underlines regret in these women's commemoration of their deaths.

My project seeks to assess and reflect on the difference between the conduct and expression of grief of the Damascene woman I met and the typical conduct of women occupying the same position in al-Dahiya. After all, one could argue that they both have similar symbolic/ discursive/ ritual resources available to them.

Leaving Damascus, I now turn my attention into my home and the home of my interlocutors Al-Dahiya.

### ***A Vignette from Al-Dahiya***

*I was walking with my interlocutor Fatima (who lost her brother fighting in Syria) from next to Mujamma ' Sayyid As-shuhadā<sup>5</sup> to a Ashura commemoration that we were both attending at her friend's house. It was a humid late Tuesday afternoon, and we saw a large group of women inside the fences of the Mujamma ', wearing mostly black chadors preparing small nylon packages of coconut cookies, Orange and Pineapple juice, a few dates and small plastic bottles of water.*

---

<sup>5</sup> It is an imposing structure located on one of the busy streets.

*Even with the beautifully planted flowers on the sides of this imposing structure, people who reside in its entourage know how stressful it could be to walk next to it. There is constantly a man wearing his full battledress with a large shotgun guarding the mujamma 's black gate. Irrespective of your innocent endeavor just passing by, the imposing aura of the place and its guards<sup>6</sup> make you doubt yourself and walk faster. If there are no main events that justify you looking at it, like the annual provisions' exhibition called Ardi ('arḏī), you avoid staring or walking suspiciously. Fatima told me that whenever she walks by, she tries to slightly rush unconsciously.*

*A young man is assigned for the morning guarding shifts. Sometimes when I walk by, I see him joking friendly with some of the car drivers passing by. Other times, he catcalls me saying "Smallah".*

*In front of the mujamma', there are two competing juices stores that sell exclusively three mixes of natural juices (Mango, avocado and strawberry) for less than two thousands pounds. In between them are a nuts shop and another phone covers shop. All these shops use most of the pedestrian sidewalk to exhibit their merchandise which makes it hard to walk in straight line in front of them. The mujamma 's popularity, being one of the main places where Hezbollah holds its events, makes these shops strive. If you continue walking down that street, you will see a large printing shop called al-ma 'āref. One day, a friend living in the Eastern side of Beirut came to Dahiya for the first time to visit me. And knowing how cheap the printing costs are in al-ma 'āref compared to those around AUB for example, we decided to make a stop there. As we were walking down the stairs, she whispered to me how overwhelmed (and slightly scared) she was because of all the pictures of Sayyid Hassan Nassrallah,*

---

<sup>6</sup> The only Hezbollah guarded men that you will meet.

*Hezbollah's secretary general, used in the shop to demonstrate their printing works. Accustomed to the omnipresence of his face, I never noticed that it covered the mugs, t-shirts and heart shaped pillows in the shop. I told Fatima the story and she laughed. She told me that she never noticed it as well. Next to this place, you can find the only mixed gym in the area.*

*At the intersection between Mujamma 'Sayyid Al-Shuhadā and al-Ruweiss Street, a street that has witnessed two consecutive ISIS attacks in 2013 and 2014, a large black tent had been set up on the side of the road. Dressed in black, three men were energetically mixing a bowl of hrīseh<sup>7</sup> in three big copper cooking pots, while two others poured it in plastic cups to passengers stopping by. As we passed by the tent, Fatima pointed towards an Emerald green cloth covering the roof of the tent and on which it was written: "every day is Ashura and every land is Karbala (kullu yawmen 'āshūrā', kullu 'arḍen karbalā')". She remarked: "I love this quote but I think that if it's not a Hadith (ḥadīth)<sup>8</sup>, then Hezbollah should add to it every man is Husayn and every woman is Zaynabe. Look at what happened in Syria! Weren't what our men really fought the descendants of Umayyad (bani Umayya) and the descendants of Yazid? Aren't we just like Zaynabe? We were patient (taṣabbarnā) and performed jihad (jāhadnā) as well".*

---

<sup>7</sup> A famous traditional soup of wheat and chicken made in Ashura, generally in big tents on streets and distributed for free as alms and a gift for the spirit of Imam Husayn who died thirsty and hungry.

<sup>8</sup>The hadith (*ḥadīth*) is a record of the traditions and sayings of the Prophet Mohammad, received by Muslims to be the second most important source for religious and ethical guidance after the holy Qur'an.



*Figure 2: The hrīseh making in Al-Dahiya in Ashura (September, 2019) Photo credit: Aline Androun*

This small opening vignette describes a part of the world that Fatima and I inhabit through one road that we both, almost daily, walk. It also illustrates, with Fatima’s statement, what I later understood to be a prevailing narrative among most women related to the martyrs in the community<sup>9</sup> and therefore most of my interlocutors as well.

### ***What is the connection between Al-Dahiya and Hezbollah?***

Al-Dahiya, literally meaning in Arabic “the suburb”, is the Southern Suburb of Beirut. It includes several rural neighborhoods that used to be agricultural villages before several waves of refugees transformed it into an urban suburb. Most of the

---

<sup>9</sup> In the thesis, by community, I refer to people residing in the Southern Suburn of Beirut who are officially affiliated with Hezbollah.

refugees were displaced from East and North Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War (1975- 1990) or escapees coming from the South after the Israeli Invasion in 1978. Both displaced groups were Shi'a, and still, till nowadays al-Dahiya is predominately inhabited by Shi'a Muslims. (It does incorporate a Sunni minority too, mainly because it encompasses two Palestinians refugee camps, Burj-al-Barajne and Shatila). With all of its suburbanites being essentially a community of internal refugees, and in the wake of a long history of neglect of Shi'a citizens by the state, al-Dahiya became a space of refuge and a "misery belt". One radical change marked the history of this newly born refuge, the birth of Hezbollah.

After the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and its occupation of a strip of South Lebanon, Hezbollah was founded as a national resistance movement having as an objective "the expulsion of the Americans, the French and their allies definitely from Lebanon, putting an end to any colonialist entity on our land". Hezbollah waged a guerilla campaign and managed to kick Israel's army out of the Southern Lebanese borders. As a result, after its victory in the Lebanese South in 2000, Hezbollah grew from an relatively small resistance movement into a significant Lebanese party with seats in the Lebanese government, a radio, a TV station and different social organizations conceived in response to the growing needs of its affiliates, their families and the residents of al-Dahiya, which gradually became the main Hezbollah hub in the city (Norton, 2014). Hezbollah quickly started to mold itself into a social movement that had a cultural influence on its neighborhoods.

This is partly why al-Dahiya was largely targeted and destroyed by Israeli bombings during the Israeli War on Lebanon in the summer of July 2006. And again in

2013 and 2014, the area was subject to several terrorist attacks presumably as a response to Hezbollah's interference in the Syrian Civil War.

But Hezbollah is not merely a political party, as its name shows, literally the Party of God, derived from a verse in the Qur'an: "And whoever is an ally of Allah and His Messenger and those who have believed – indeed, the party of Allah – they will be the predominant". (Surah Al- Maida, 56). Hezbollah was conceived by Muslim Shi'a clerics, and has been funded by the Islamic Republic of Iran. While the party has the formal governing structure of a modern institution, the three consecutive Hezbollah leaders Mustafa Al Toufayli (1989-1991), Abbas al Moussawi (1991-1992) and Hassan Nasrallah (1992-present) were all believers in, and promoters of, the principle of Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists (*wilayat-al-fakih*) which concentrates all authority and powers in its religious leaders, whose decisions then flow from the Ulama down to the entire community (Norton, 2014). And since the Supreme Leader of Iran is the ultimate clerical authority, the *waliy faqih*, Hezbollah's leaders have appealed to Khomeini and Khaminai consecutively for guidance and directives (Norton, 2014). The essence of Hezbollah's principles is thus of religious nature and the party understands itself as a continuation of the Islamic Revolution of Iran that promotes Islamic governance, including at times *Jihād* and martyrdom. All the dead Hezbollah fighters, the ones who died willingly while participating in Hezbollah's military activities against Israel, Wahhabi militant groups or in the Syrian War in general, have been considered Islamic martyrs. This Imamiyyah Shi'a Islamic-inspired essence lies deep within the core of Hezbollah's identity, and makes a wide range of discourses possible for both the party's affiliates and followers, the "incubating base" (*al-bī'a al- ḥāḍina*) of Hezbollah (Blanford, 2011).

For example, under Hezbollah's guidance, the community continually avails itself of the historical narrative of Ashura to interpret its battles. A key analogy is drawn between the Hezbollah fighters' death and the massacre of Karbala, a significant event in Islamic history when the grandson of the Prophet, a revolutionary leader who took a stand against Yazid ibn Mouawiya's illegitimate rule, Imam Husayn, was murdered mercilessly alongside with seventy of his family and followers (mainly men) in 61 AH. The massacre of Karbala, which the Islamic Revolution of Iran mobilized as its fundamental inspiration during the events leading to the overthrow of the Shah's rule, is also very present in the discourse of Hezbollah (Bizaa, 2011). Annually, al-Dahiya witnesses one of the largest Shi'a marches in the region, on the annual commemoration of Ashura, and each year, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah brings about again in his speeches a convergence between Ashura and Hezbollah's fights, considering the Hezbollah martyrs as Hussainiyyin, disciples of Hussain, because like him, they endorsed death over submissiveness. Thousands of participants echo after him, the famous quote of Imam Husayn: "Far from us is disgrace! (*hayhāt minnā al-dilla*)"

The chronicle of Karbala thus constitutes a powerful resource for clerics, officials and individuals to interpret the death of fighters killed in the battles waged by Hezbollah. Martyrdom in the Islamic tradition is a rich concept which can be traced back to the Islamic verse "Count not those who were slain in God's way as dead, but rather living with their Lord, by Him provided" (Surah Al-Bakarah, verse 169). Next to other equally powerful Qur'anic verses on martyrdom, exist hundreds of Hadiths on the high standing of martyrs. One hadith for example states that a martyr could intercede for up to seventy persons from among his relatives on the Day of Resurrection (Al Albani,

1995), a capacity that only Prophets and Imams usually possess, while tens of other hadiths portray the stupendous rewards of the martyr in the afterlife.

Although we were used to hearing references to Karbala<sup>10</sup> in the battles of South Lebanon in 2000s and during the July War 2006 by the fighters, their families and Hezbollah supporters, what mostly prevailed then were discourses on the nation state (protecting and liberating the Lebanese land). However, Hezbollah's continued military involvement in Syria since 2012 generated a shift in the Karbala narrative.

For instance, a key element in my interlocutors' interpretation of this intervention in Syria was the presence of the shrine of Sayyida Zaynabe in Damascus that conveyed its historical meaning to the Hezbollah Intervention in Syria's narrative. During the battles in Damascus, this shrine ceased to be only a material space and *became* an extension of Sayyida Zaynabe's historical presence which led to a recreation of the historical narrative of Ashura. As ISIS started to direct its attacks towards Damascus and hinted at the possibility of destroying the famous shrine there (from 2012 to 2014), Hezbollah started what was called "the Holy Defense *al-difā' al-muqaddas*" in collaboration with the Syrian Army to protect the shrine from what my interlocutors recognized as the "viciousness of the grandsons of Yazid". ISIS fighters were thus portrayed as the continuators of Yazid's aggression on Ahl- Al-Bayt, and Hezbollah fighters as being the new *husayniyyīn* (Husayn-like figures or Husayn's disciples as interpreted by some of my interlocutors).

Hence, the context of these battles did not only elevate Sayyida Zaynabe as a figure, but they also made her much more present in the daily discourses of the women

---

<sup>10</sup> In the thesis, I will be using Karbala and Ashura interchangeably just like my interlocutors do. Karbala is the land on which the massacre took place (currently Iraq) and Ashura is the day on which the massacre happened (the 10<sup>th</sup> of Muharram, the first Hijri Month).



related to the fighters. This helped perpetuating narratives that people use to interpret death and make sense of it. Not only were Hezbollah fighters and supporters repeating “Zaynabe won’t be taken captive twice! (*lan tusbā zaynab marratayn*)” but women also started repeating after Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah “Here I am Sayyida Zaynabe! (*labbaykī yā zaynab*)”.



*Figure 3: Women in the Ashura commemoration in Al-Dahiya (September, 2019) Photo credit: Aline Androun.*

Yet, in front of the impossibility for them to become actively martyrs themselves, my interlocutors (and women related to the martyrs in general) often have

to deal with the martyrdom of males other. This drives them to find their own ways of creatively inventing and actively participating in new social ways of being. And, for this purpose Sayyida Zaynabe's story offers a powerful imaginary. As the stories of Ashura repeatedly narrate what happened with her upon the martyrdom of her brother Imam Husayn, her children and her brothers, a Shi'a woman who lost her son, husband or father in a battle interpreted as against the enemies of Islam can relate to her easily. And the women in Karbala and especially Sayyida Zaynabe bore witness to the martyrdom of her brother Imam Husayn — and stood for, became an embodiment of — the righteousness of his cause. Similarly, the wives, mothers, sisters and daughters related to the Hezbollah martyrs avail themselves of this whole tradition in such a way that they come to inhabit and recreate these stories of their dead dear ones as martyrs, as those self-actualized men, *husayniyyīn*, who are not completely dead, sometimes not at all, and of themselves as *Zaynabiyyāt*, as disciples of Zaynabe and therefore as the patient witnesses of the death and as those on whom the responsibility falls to carry the legacy of the martyr who has departed *al-dunyā*. Through the discursive actualization of the tradition, these women are also invited to reflect on themselves as enablers of the continuing relation between the martyr and *al-dunyā*. Thus, there is a role for them to play, just like Sayyida Zaynabe, as survivors of this violence and as prime witness bearers of it. Some of these women view their role as defined by the obligation to endure the pain, and to carry the martyr's message and legacy (as Sayyida Zaynabe did in Yazid's royal court). So, since she cannot be like Imam Hussein, a “good” Shi'a woman according to the community should try to emulate Sayyida Zaynabe by being patient, not giving up to the pain of loss and actively carrying Imam Hussein's cause.

Yet, there is a paucity of detailed accounts in the tradition on Sayyida Zaynabe's attitude in the wake of her brother's martyrdom. As a result, there is also an absence of a general social consensus on how, practically, to live one's life as a survivor of such a death. This leaves a great deal to these women to figure it out, each largely on their own.

The absence of a fully-fledged model to emulate empowers a creative form of self-making in the process of grieving and allows these women simultaneously to innovatively take part in the making and keeping of the collective narrative surrounding martyrdom in their community. So, how to adequately stand for the martyr and rightfully embody the righteousness of his cause without a clear model to emulate and in a complex urban environment such as *Al-Dahiya*?

### ***A divine death and some tensions***

Growing up and living in al-Dahiya for most of my life, I am used to hearing accounts like the following: "I always make dua<sup>11</sup> to Allah so he would return my son as a martyr to me" (which an old woman told me whose son went to fight in Syria in 2015). Other women I have met are showing endurance and vow to emulate Sayyida Zaynabe: "I am no better than Sayyida Zaynabe! If she could endure the loss of her brother, the Great Imam Hussein peace be upon him, and be brave enough to face Yazid afterwards, then I can do it too", uttered the wife of a relative, a part-timer with Hezbollah that sent him to the battlefield on the Lebanese eastern borders with Syria. Yet another woman whose husband died with Hezbollah expressed a refusal of remarriage: "I shall never marry again! My husband is not dead, he is a martyr"! or "My

---

<sup>11</sup> Prayers.

Husband is my intercession on the day of Resurrection. How could I be saddened if being alone with two orphaned young children is the cost I have to pay in *al-dunyā* in order to enter paradise in *al- 'ākhirā*?" It is not rare at all to hear a bereaved mother say: "I am pleased that God chose to bless me with the martyrdom of my son" or "I told my son before he went to Syria 'Do not come back! I vowed to Sayyida Zaynabe that my son shall protect her shrine with his blood'". A daughter of a martyr even once told me "I miss my dad, but I am proud that he is a martyr. If Allah wants to take a soul, he will, no matter what. So I considered it to be an honor for me that my dad's soul left this world due not to a car accident for example, but as a martyr who defended a cause".

Although these accounts convey a strong sense of assertiveness and determination, one can quickly distinguish beneath their surface some tensions that come to pervade and color the lives of these women.

A first tension follows from the ambiguous state of the martyr, a man who is neither completely dead nor fully alive, and whose death is highly honorable and religiously beneficial, especially for his close kin and acquaintances, as it promises access to a pleasant afterlife. Thus these women acknowledge the feelings of grief and sorrow they experience due to this tremendously painful event, but at the same they are invited to feel proud, honored and content because such a good death took place. A second tension or paradox comes into sight when these women feel a continuous relation to the martyr: they became mediators between him and *al-dunyā*, continuing witnesses of his endurance after he departed this world, and bearers of his legacy in this world. It is not rare to hear these women speak elaborately about carrying the legacy of the martyr and continuing his journey. In navigating this new trajectory, they find themselves facing an existential dilemma that imposes on them yet another tension

between worldliness, being in this world, and otherworldliness, renouncing it. A third tension occurs when these women use the language of offering (*al-qurbān*), sacrifice (*al-taḍḥiya*) and consolation (*al-muwāsāt*) to describe this death (the martyrdom) in relation to Allah<sup>12</sup> and Ahl Al-Bayt. For example, we would hear them say that the martyrdom was a consolation for Sayyida Zaynabe, or Ahl Al-Bayt in general. Or, that they will try to tolerate the pain just like Sayyida Zaynabe did (while usually emphasizing that her misfortune is indeed greater than theirs but she managed to endure the pain). The collectivization of the pain also takes place through these women's participation in the collective rituals of Ashura, where they're invited to interpret their story as a re-enactment of Ashura. They not only try to inhabit Ahl Al-Bayt's painful experiences but to prolong the liminal phase of the rituals of Ashura and to inhabit it in the everyday. It is this understanding of death and grief as parts of a greater cosmic picture, aligned with religious-political purposes, which renders it collective. As emphasized in the Islamic tradition, the martyr is a martyr for the entire nation of Islam, for the justice owed to humanity even, and not just for his mother, his wife or his daughter. This practice of locating grief as externalized and as having a collective relevance that far exceeds one's own individual biography stands in sharp tension with the discourse of trauma which invites the individual to acknowledge and look after her private loss and pain. A third tension is thus felt between the collectivization *vs.* the irreducible privacy of one's grief.

With the Syrian War seemingly moving towards its closure, the following chapters seek to document the three main pairs of tensions (namely between grief and contentment, worldliness and otherworldliness and collectivization *vs.* irreducible

---

<sup>12</sup> In this thesis, I will use Allah and God interchangeably as my interlocutors do.

privacy of one's grief) that emerge at the intersection of needs, desires and emotions during the process of grief in the daily lives of my interlocutors as they are felt, talked about, lived, experienced, invoked and interpreted. In the hope of rendering my argument more concrete and vivid for the reader, I will evoke passages of my ethnographic interviews with my interlocutors, which will hopefully put each pair of tensions into stark relief to help illustrate and analyze it. However, I need to emphasize that this is merely both an analytical and an artificial distinction since, as we will see in what follows, the three pairs of tensions work together in variously entangled manners in most of these stories.

Analyzing these tensions could help us understand the complexity of the socio-cultural milieu that my interlocutors find themselves in. Such understanding grants us a deeper comprehension of the efforts needed and employed by these women to make sense of the unbearable pain of the annihilation of their dear ones. The agency and the complex meaning-making involved in the process within these societal limits, both suggest that one cannot frame the topic of grief for them within a reductive concept such as trauma or too simple one such as endurance.

# CHAPTER I

## THE TENSION BETWEEN CONTENTMENT (*ar-riḍā*) AND *GRIEF*

Grief sometimes raises the mundane into the sacred. But, what if the act of death, namely martyrdom, is already thought of as divine?

Martyrs are extremely valued in the community. Not every man is inherently qualified to become one<sup>13</sup>. In fact, it is well known among this community that God *chooses* his martyrs<sup>14</sup>. And by choosing a martyr, God is also choosing a family to honor it with this gift of the martyrdom. This gift from Allah, mediated by the martyr who made the ultimate sacrifice of giving his soul, must be reciprocated by the acceptance (*ar-riḍā*)<sup>15</sup> of the family. It is hence necessary for the women related to the martyr to embody a proud state by showcasing strength and patience (*ṣabr*) which demonstrates their gratefulness for such a good death.

Some women, being invited to feel proud, honored and content because such a good death took place, refuse to cry in the commemoration of their martyrs. In 2014, I

---

<sup>13</sup> This romanticization of the martyrs is vividly present in the social imaginaries of the community but as my fieldwork with Fatima will show in what follows, it is not always the case that the martyr is necessarily the most pious.

<sup>14</sup> In this almost omnipresent idea of God's choice, a martyr does not become one upon his death on the battlefield. The category of martyrdom works as a performative category that influences how one might reflect at the martyr's life before his death. His whole life in *al-dunyā* becomes a natural causation for his martyrdom which renders the event of the martyrdom A Continuity and not a rupture of it.

<sup>15</sup> Although the idea of acceptance (satisfaction) (*riḍā*) is more broadly related to Muslims' duty of accepting Gods' fate (*al-riḍā bi-qaḍā' 'allā wa qadaru*), it is more specifically related within the community with the position that Sayyida Zaynabe took upon the martyrdom of al-Imam al-Husayn. She showed her acceptance and satisfaction for God's fate of taking her brother's life by asking him (God) a rhetorical question (Are you satisfied O God? Take until you become satisfied! (*'aradīta yā rabb? Khud hattā tarḍā!*)).

attended a commemoration of a Hezbollah's martyr who died in Syria. His mother started ululating and spreading white flower petals on his body as if he was getting married. When her two sisters started weeping, she told them to go to the other room "because this is a commemoration (*tashyī'*) and not a funeral (*'azā'*)<sup>16</sup> and that they must have been mistaken with the address". This year, when I started developing my project, I was discussing with a friend from the community who attended that same commemoration with me. When I informed her about the topic she warned me not to do interviews with "women like that" and then she added:

"This new generation of women whose sons became martyrs in Syria<sup>17</sup> is acting in a wrong way (*bi-ṭarīqa khāṭi'a*). They are giving a wrong idea about the whole community and that it is easy on us to lose our dear ones. We are losing the best of our youth (*khīret ṣabābnā*)<sup>18</sup> and they should not portray this as being easy (*mush lāzim ysaṣwūrū 'innu sahl*)".

Being caught in a deep sorrow, a woman could cast doubt onto the honorability of this death. However, not displaying any sign of mournfulness is problematic as well since it suggests that such loss is ordinary, that the martyr was just any other dead man.

---

<sup>16</sup> Etymologically (*tashyī'*) refers to the last walk that accompanies the dead's body to the grave while (*'azā'*) means condolences. But in the community, (*'azā'*) is the funeral organized for the regular dead while (*tashyī'*) is the commemoration for the martyrs. Rarely did my interlocutors use the word (*'azā'*) when speaking about the martyrs and they would usually employ (*tashyī'*) instead.

<sup>17</sup> As I already hinted at in the introduction of this chapter, one might theorize for example that the Hezbollah intervention in Syria (especially against ISIS) was different than the two main other wars the party fought against Israel (from the late 90s till 2000, and the July War 2006). While those two wars took place against a national enemy to defend Lebanon as a nation state, the Hezbollah intervention in Syria acquired a very different position in the minds of both the party and its supporters due to its religious dimension. It is thus primordial to keep this dimension in mind, namely because it affects how the women deal with their grief.

<sup>18</sup> This is related to the same idea of God choosing the best of his pious worshippers to become martyrs.



She might also be blamed for offending the whole community by conveying that such deaths are easily tolerable and that the men were easily sacrificed<sup>19</sup>.

Thus, while there is an imperative on these women to embody acceptance (*ar-riḍā*), they must also acknowledge the feelings of grief and sorrow they experience due to this tremendously painful event. The first tension follows specifically from those two contradicting needs.

A woman related to a Hezbollah martyr has to *calibrate* her emotions; she must not grieve too much, nor completely disengage from the grieving process. She must walk a very thin line<sup>20</sup>. How does this tension make itself visible in the everyday lives of these women? In what follows, I share one ethnographic interview I conducted with Fatima whom I mentioned in the opening vignette to attend to how she experienced this tension between contentment (*ar-riḍā*) and grief. I then attempt to analyze specific passages that illustrate it.

When Fatima contacted me on WhatsApp, I was surprised twice. First, I was pleasantly surprised by how warm she was (her message was: “Salam! (with a pink flower emoticon). Your friend told me that you are doing a research on the women related to the martyrs. I would like to participate (heart emoticon)”). And second, she was the only woman that I interviewed for this project that puts her actual picture as a

---

<sup>19</sup> So as the wife of a martyr, if I am too happy I might be negating the gravity of my loss hence undermining the sacrifice made by the other women (and eventually the whole community) but if I act too sad then I might be negating the affirmation in the tradition that my husband died a good death.

<sup>20</sup> Walking a thin line reminded of Elizabeth Lunbeck’s notion of “good girl” in “Hysteria: The Revolt of the ‘Good Girl’” (Lunbek, 1994), where she investigates how hysteria was thought of in the early twentieth century by psychoanalysts. She describes it as being conceived as a “double-edged narrative of seduction”. Most patients were victims of sexual assaults and hysteria rendered visible the anxiety that they might completely disengage with heterosexuality. A *good girl* is the girl who walks successfully the boundaries of performing shyness and innocence while not giving up entirely on her sexuality. If she acts too innocently, she might be perceived as asexual but if she oversteps the societally agreed boundaries, she might be seen as a bad girl, a girl who is morally perverted.

profile picture on this app. The other women would usually put photos of nature landscapes, Islamic quotes, their martyr, or their kids<sup>21</sup>. But Fatima was different in this matter. Once I added her number, I started getting her status updates. In one picture she was sitting on a swing in what seemed like a garden in a village and quoted it:

“Alhamdulillah on the spirit of childhood that never dies.”

She asked me to meet her at the Faculty of Journalism of the Lebanese University so we can conduct the interview in a café nearby. I later found out that she is majoring in Public Relations at this faculty. On this sunny Friday afternoon, she was waiting for me on the stairs at the entrance of her department while holding a stack of papers in her left hand. She told me later that she is working on her graduation project where she has to implement new social media strategies to market a certain fictional enterprise. “It all happened by accident, I wanted to be a journalist not a PR.” She then commented. “During the final days of the registration of new students, I was still a full time assistant in a nursery and I couldn’t leave earlier on any day, so I delegated the registration procedure to my best friend, and instead of ticking the box of the Journalism major as I told her, she unintentionally ticked the Public Relations major box, and here I am”. “Do you regret it then?” I asked. “No” she firmly answered while pressing her fingers on the papers. “I have a faith in Allah and that he always chooses wisely for us. Maybe he knew that I won’t ever be a good journalist since I am a very shy person or

---

<sup>21</sup> It is common for conservative pious women in my community to abstain from sharing their photos on social media for reasons related to modesty *hishma* (especially those wearing black ‘abāya or chador). This action might be seen as an emulation of Sayyida Fatima, the daughter of the prophet Mohammad, the mother of Sayyida Zaynabe and “the mistress of the women of the world *sayyidat nisā’ al-‘ālamīn*, who reportedly said in a hadith after being asked “who is the best woman?, “The one which is not seen by men, and that does not see men.”

Younger women might sometimes resort to hiding their face with an inserted emoticon (like a smiley face) if they felt like sharing something online.

maybe because this job requires advanced networking skills and internships that he knew I wouldn't be able to afford.” We were both walking on a road that slides down towards the Mediterranean Sea. The sun was shining brightly on the waves and Fatima was steadily gazing at it.

She is a petite young woman; her skin is pale with clear blue eyes surrounded by dark circles. Her eyebrows were thin and very light. She was not wearing any make up. All her hands' nails were carefully trimmed except her thumbs'. She was wearing a loose soft pink and blue *shar'ī*. The fabric of her cloth was hardly fancy. But her matching indigo blue heels and flowery *'īshārb* were indeed elegant.



*Figure 4: Fatima*

It took me a while to recognize her familiar face but twenty minutes into our meeting I suddenly remembered her. She was a participant in “xx”, a community of pious young women and men, most of who with higher education, mentored by a

Hezbollah affiliate who is known in the Dahiya's elite circles for his charismatic personality and his social media expertise. This community held their meetings weekly following the Friday Prayer in an organization where I used to work. I remember helping them adjust the room for their meeting. They would split the chairs in two sections. Men always sat on the left and women on the right forming a semi-circle<sup>22</sup>. Their mentor would routinely move between the well-organized seats and initiate discussion topics, then write key words on the white board. After their meetings, I would help them reorganize the room and clean the board. I can clearly remember some of the words, sentences and illustrations that I erased from the white board: "Struggle against oneself in modern times (*Jihād el nafs*)<sup>23</sup> (*fī al-zaman al-mu'āşir*)", "How to piously and purposefully use social media? (*kayfa nastakhdim mawāki' al-tawāşol al-ijtimā'ī bi ʔarīqa multazima wa nāfi'ā*)" and "How to prepare oneself for Imam Al Mahdi's reappearance (*kayfa yuḥādīru al-mar'u nafsahu li zuhūr al-imām al-mahdī*)"?

But this is not the only activity that Fatima enjoys in her free time. When she is not studying, she works as field reporter for xxx Radio and volunteers at a local organization.

"I come from an underprivileged family. I do not like to talk about it a lot, but this association helped me when I was younger. They taught us, poor girls, Basic English and computer skills, cooking and knotting so we feel empowered<sup>24</sup>. They even

---

<sup>22</sup> This gender segregation is common to Hezbollah's organized events.

<sup>23</sup> The struggle (fight) against one's self (*Jihād al-nafs*) is a key concept in the Islamic tradition. It refers to the duty that falls on each Muslim to fight one's evil temptations and to constantly seek self-betterment. It is considered to be the greatest *jihād* (*al-jihād al-'akbar*) as it is thought to be much more difficult than fighting the enemies on the battlefield which is considered to be the smaller *jihad* (*al-jihād al-'aşgar*).

<sup>24</sup> I remember participating in similar workshops. The activities are mostly divided according to gender. (Activities for women include knotting, cooking, chocolate and soap making, make up trainings and

provided me with a therapist to deal with some of the psychological issues I had.” She hesitated before continuing: “After they landed me a helping hand for years, I decided to give back and now I help younger girls there because I know how it feels not to be able to have the same things the other kids have. For example, the first two years at my university were arduous on me. I did not own a lap top and had to do all my research on the phone or ask my friends to prepare my power point presentations.”

We reached the café Fatima chose for our interview. It was a small coffee shop on the main street with a sea view on our right and red roses planted next to our table. The tables were tiny and we had to sit really close in front of each other. Luckily, Fatima was much more relaxed at this point and she didn’t seem to mind it.

“Before I start telling you about my brother I want you to mention the following in your research: The resistance is a path that we loyally walk on (*ṭarīq mnemshī ‘alee biwafā’*). Sometimes we might make mistakes, others we might get it right. But there is always a steady pathway on which we walk. The resistance<sup>25</sup> is anchored in our souls (*al-mukāwama mahfūrā bi’arwāḥnā*).”

When I started doing fieldwork for this thesis, I did not expect for this concept of “path” to become so substantial to my interlocutors’ understanding of their social worlds. Most of my interlocutors referred to this path of resistance (*nahj al-muqāwama or khaṭṭ al-mukāwama or ṭarīq al-mukāwama* interchangeably) while explaining to me how they underwent their grief process. As I understood from them, there exists an indispensable analogy (that they draw) between the path of the resistance and the

---

arabesque; Activities for men include electrical engines maintenance, mechanical repairs and plumbing trainings).

<sup>25</sup> My interlocutors often use Hezbollah and the resistance interchangeably.

righteous path, a key concept in the Islamic tradition that is discussed in the first surah in the Qur'an "*al-fātiḥa*" where God teaches believers to ask him to guide them to it ("Guide us to the straight path (*'ihdinā al-ṣirāṭa al-mustaqīm*)", *al-fātiḥa*, verse 6).

The righteous path or the straight path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) is a metaphorical path in *al-dunyā*, but it acquires a literal meaning in *al-'ākhira*. Since on the day of the resurrection (*yawm al-qiyāma*), every human should walk an extremely thin line (thinner than a strand of hair) that leads to heaven. For those who were obedient and actively sought the righteous path in *al-dunyā*, walking on the righteous path in *al-'ākhira* will be "quicker than thunder". But those who failed to pursue this path in *al-dunyā* fall off the path in *al-'ākhira* into one of the valleys of hell called *wayl*.

In the same sense, this path of the resistance (*nahj al-mukāwama*) is seen by my interlocutors as a delicate line, and indeed a very difficult one, to walk on and navigate. And in many ways, it intersects with the righteous path (*as-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*). The path of the resistance is seen to be ultimately directed towards two goals that coincide with those of the righteous path. First, there is the goal of defeating the enemies of the land and of Islam in the smaller *jihād*. And, second is the goal of conquering the enemies of the self (including parts of the self itself like the evil commanding self (*al-nafs al-'ammāra bil sū'*)) in the bigger *jihād*. And thus walking this path in *al-dunyā* might grant the walkers an easier walk on *as-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* in *al-'ākhira*.

Some of my interlocutors also pointed to the fact that the path of Hezbollah is in continuity with the path of *Ahl-Al-Bayt*. They told me that when speaking about *nahj-al-mukāwama*, they are also acknowledging that Hezbollah's project is anchored in the far past. My interlocutors often draw connections between the victimhood and the

oppression of Ahl al-Bayt (*mazlūmiyyat Ahl-Al-Bayt*)<sup>26</sup> and their own (as the disciples of the prophet and Ahl Al-Bayt) at the hands of the Zionists and ISIS fighters. Thus, my interlocutors understand their oppression by Israelis and later the threats of ISIS as a natural conflict between the path of righteousness (*tarīq al-ḥaqq*) and that of the obsolete (*tarīq al-bāṭil*) and a continuation of the path of *Ahl-Al-Bayt*. We will see reference to this concept of path by my interlocutors many times later in this thesis.



*Figure 5: Al-Imam Al-Mahdi's scouts in the commemoration of Ashura in Al-Dahiya (September 2019) Photo Credit: Aline Androun*

---

<sup>26</sup> (*mazlūmiyyat* of 'ahl-al-bayt) is the recognition by the Shia generally and by the community especially, that since the death of the prophet, Ali and his sons (the other eleven imams) have been tyrannized by the succeeding caliphates, unjustly treated and prohibited from their right of ruling. In a famous *riwāya* by al-Imam al-Rida, he said: Every single one of us 'ahl-al-bayt has died as a martyr, either by poison or by sword (*mā minnā 'ahl-al-bayt 'illā waqad māta shahīdan 'immā bil sayf 'aw masmūman*).

However, while availing herself of this concept of “path”, Fatima contrasted her experience of the martyrdom of her brother with the social imaginary in the community of how a martyr *should* be in order to attain this prestigious status<sup>27</sup>.

“My brother is the martyr Mohammad. One thing that you should know about him is that he’s not the martyr of the Rosary as I call it (*mannu shahīd al-masbaha*)<sup>28</sup>. He committed a lot of sins and mistakes then sought forgiveness. He wasn’t born an angel. The martyr is a human, but the moment he becomes a martyr he precedes angels (*yasbuq al-malā’ikā*)<sup>29</sup>.

No one expected Mohammad to become a martyr<sup>30</sup>. He loved *al-dunyā*<sup>31</sup>. He was handsome and used to take care of himself and his beauty, even more than I do! A lot of women were attracted to him. He was never single. He listened to music but not the shitty ones and he knew many Lebanese singers personally. He cared so much about his style and he liked to socialize with everyone. He also liked to prank his friends all the time.” She laughed so hard, as though one of the pranks had just taken place in

---

<sup>27</sup> In one interview I made earlier with a famous painter from the community whose drawings deal the theme of martyrdom, he told me that martyrs are divine creatures (*kā’in qudsī*). In his drawings, one could see light emerging from the martyr’s faces.

<sup>28</sup> The rosary in the community is a metaphor for extreme pioussness. The martyr of the rosary (*shahīd al-masbaha*) is the martyr who abides by the general stereotype of how a martyr should be in the social imaginary of the Hezbollah community.

<sup>29</sup> In the Islamic tradition, angels have a mind (‘*aql*) but without a lust (*shahwa*) / instinct (*ġarīza*), animals have lust (*shahwa*) (or *ġarīza*) without a mind and humans have both mind (‘*aql*) and (*shahwa*) (or *ġarīza*). Being the only one between the other creatures who is endowed with a capacity to choose (*mukhayyar*), a human can either *choose* her mind (‘*aql*) over her lust (*shahwa*) (or *ġarīza*) and thus precedes angels. Or, she can choose her lust ( *shahwa* )(or *ġarīza*) over her mind (‘*aql*) and thus becomes lower to animals.

<sup>30</sup> I did not find a word in English that is equivalent to “actively seeking martyrdom” that the Arabic word “*yastashhid*” conveys.

<sup>31</sup> Many of my interlocutors (like Zahraa and Sarah) as we will see later, put a lot on emphasis on the idea that the martyr used to love *al-dunyā*, in an attempt of them to assert that he did not go to the battlefield in desperation for death. But I see Fatima’s move here slightly different because what I think she might be saying is that Mohammad’s love for *al-dunyā* implies his unconventional image of a martyr.



front of us. She does not seem shy anymore, I thought to myself. Now the Fatima in front of me is a vivacious person, frequently smiling with a bright face.

“You can feel a martyr before he becomes one (*momkin thissī bis-shahīd ’abel mā yṣīr*)<sup>32</sup>. There’s a strange feeling that grows inside of you when you see them talk, walk or even eat. You notice it but you can never articulate it. You know that their life will be short and there is a certain aura that starts to shine in their faces. You feel that martyrdom awaits them (*al-shahāda bi-’intīzarun*)<sup>33</sup>. My brother was so handsome but when I last saw him before his martyrdom he was looking extremely good. His beauty was shining. Even our neighbors noticed it and told us in the last day they saw Mohammad before his martyrdom, his beauty was exceptional<sup>34</sup>. You also feel like the martyr knows about his martyrdom beforehand and starts preparing the people around him. His friends came to us and also told us that when they last sat with him in a coffee shop he told them: ‘I do not intend to die stupidly, by a motorcycle accident or a drug overdose. I want to defend Sayyida Zaynabe and become a martyr. You will see! I will make *Ahl-Al-Bayt* proud of me.’”

---

<sup>32</sup> Many of my interlocutors expressed a similar sentiment.

<sup>33</sup> In the Islamic tradition, good deeds (*ḥasanāt*) like prayer (*ṣalāt*) or alms-giving (*zakat*) and bad deeds (*sayyi’āt*) like stealing or like taking interest on debts (*ribā*) are personified by Allah on the day of the resurrection (*yawm al-qiyāma*) and they witness with or against their committers. Inspired by it, many times when my interlocutors talked about martyrdom I got a sense that they are speaking about martyrdom as a somewhat personified entity that chooses (martyrdom chooses *her* men (*as-shahāda btekhtār rijālha*), or like in this example of Fatima’s brother, she awaits them (*as-shahāda bi-’intīzarun*). In the second tension between worldliness and other-worldliness, my interlocutors will often talk about martyrdom as a person.

<sup>34</sup> In the social imaginary of the community, martyrs are often thought of as handsome men. And even when the martyr is not what might one considers a conventional handsome man, people will still remark that something about his aura is eye soothing because of their pure spirits that reflect on their looks. This emphasis on physical beauty as a sign of inner beauty has many origins in the Islamic tradition. A verse of the *Qur’an* for example states that the believers have their traits evident on their faces “The mark of them (i.e. of their Faith) is on their (Mohammad and his disciples) faces (*sīmāhum fī wujūhihum*)” (*al-Fath*, 29).

Fatima was on the verge of weeping. In order to resist crying or to distract herself maybe, she quickly reached for her phone from her pink purse and started looking for photos of her brother. It was not long before she found one. She said enthusiastically while showing me: “Look! He was blonde! I always tell people that my brother left as a king and came back as a prince<sup>35</sup>.”

While her own personal knowledge of the profile of a specific martyr does not conform to the ideal shared in the social imaginary of the community, Fatima does not challenge the sacredness of the martyr’s status, since to her: “He wasn’t born an angel. The martyr is a human, but the moment he becomes a martyr he precedes angels (*yasbuq al-malā’ikā*)”.

Observe for instance how she responds to a friend whose similar experience made her somewhat prone to skepticism when it comes to the perceived image of the martyrs in the community.

My friend once complained to me that a man who hurt her in the past was blessed with martyrdom. She ranted to me: ‘Do you remember the guy I swore never to forgive? He is a martyr now. But tell me how? How could he possibly become a martyr?’<sup>36</sup> I told her that she could never know what happened between him and

---

<sup>35</sup> Fatima’s metaphor here might be inspired by the prophet’s hadith that “Al-imam al-Hussein is the prince of the martyrs (*‘amīr as-shuhadā’*)” and that “martyrs are the princes of the people of heaven (*as-shuhadā’ ‘umarā’ ahl-al-janna*)”.

<sup>36</sup> To understand Fatima’s friend puzzlement with how a martyr who was not forgiven by her has been blessed with martyrdom I will share a small remark that I heard from Ola one of my interlocutors whose brother was a martyr. Ola told me that if a man is not good to the women of his family (especially his mother and his wife), Allah will not grant him a graceful death such as martyrdom.

All the men that die as martyrs were so pleasant to their mothers and kind to their wives. I used to tease my husband- now ex-husband - that Allah will never bless him with martyrdom because I am not pleased with how he treated me. He went to Syria several times but he was never provided by God with the gift of martyrdom and now he believes me and says that I was right.

Allah<sup>37</sup>.” To illustrate it, she brought her palms together and smiled. “I know because the same happened with me, you know”. She looked upwards as if she was recalling some memories. “When my friends heard that my brother Mohammad became a martyr they could not believe it. Everyone expected my older brother Hassan<sup>38</sup> – never Mohammad- to receive the gift of martyrdom... They were both affiliated with Hezbollah but Hassan was the typical potential martyr. He was so pious and observant. Mohammad was also pious but he was different.

“What would you like to tell me about how you dealt with the martyrdom of your brother?” I hesitantly asked.

The waiter approached us with the orange juices we had ordered. And as she took her first sip of the juice, Fatima explained to me in a calm, melancholic voice: “When I first learned about my brother’s martyrdom, it was really hard for me to accept

---

I will not have enough space in this section to elaborate on Ola’s belief in the role the women might play in enabling the martyrdom of their relatives to take place in the first place but it is definitely worth examining for further research.

<sup>37</sup> In the Islamic tradition, there are two types of sins. The first ones are those committed towards Allah (breaching the ethical guidelines and the limits (*ḥudūd*) of Allah like failing to pray on time) and they might be forgiven with supplication (*’istiḡfār*). The other ones are those committed towards other people (like backbiting *’istiḡāba*) and those cannot be forgiven by supplication to Allah only. The one who commits this sin must ask the hurt people to forgive her as well. In the social imaginary of the community, a martyr stays held (*mu’allaq*) between *al-dunyā* and *al-’ākhira* if he committed this second type of sins and was not forgiven by others. The martyr then would usually visit his family in their dreams and ask them to ask forgiveness on his behalf or to pay amends. (I will explain this idea more broadly in the next section and in the following chapter on dreams).

<sup>38</sup> In the internal laws of Hezbollah, a man who does not have any brothers cannot be enrolled as a full-time fighter (*ta’ākud*) with the party. Even if he has sisters, the man is the one who is thought of as the breadwinner of his family and thus his martyrdom might turn out to be eventually detrimental for the family. Exceptions could be made if both parents write and sign letters for the secretary general Sayyid Hassan Nassrallah to let their only son fight, which happens often. Many stories in the community circulate about how many letters Sayyid Nassrallah received (especially from the mothers) to let their sons fight especially in the battles of the divine *jihād* (*ma’ārik al- jihād al-muqaddas*) to defend the Sayyida Zaynabe shrine in Damascus.

Going back to Fatima’s story, she has two brothers Mohammad and Hassan. Mohammad’s martyrdom meant that the chances for Hassan’s martyrdom are now very low because he will not be sent by Hezbollah to the fronts anymore.

it (*kān sa 'ib 'alayyī 'atqabbalu*) but I decided to stay collected (*qarrarit 'atamāsak*).

God favored him martyrdom in Ramadan on a Friday at noon. This timing entailed such sacredness that we were all soothed...”

“I was torn (*kint ma 'sūma*) between my grief and an urge inside me to smile. I was feeling so serene and tranquil (*sakīna wa tama 'nīna*) that my brother was chosen as a martyr. I only grieved (*ḥasseet bi-ḥozon*) a little bit because it happened abruptly. Not that I was not prepared to it. I remember that two weeks before my brother's martyrdom, I went to the commemoration (*tashyī'*) of another martyr. I saw the women crying in deep sorrow and lamenting over their loss, I sympathized (*ta 'āṭafit*) with them but then I thought to myself 'lucky them! (*niyyālun*)' I looked at the sky and supplied to God 'Oh Allah! When will be my turn? When?!' It was at this moment that I noticed that not only do I accept this grief but I also wish for it.”

“So seeing the women crying in deep sorrow (*ḥozon shadīd*) and lamenting over their loss did not scare you?” I asked.

“I realized when I saw the women grieving this way that saying farewell to someone you love -even if he was a martyr- is so strenuous but I am willing to pay this price because to me it is way more rewarding eventually. Sacrifices must be made (*lāzim tin 'amal tadḥiyāt*).”

[...]

These passages from my interview with Fatima illustrate how long after wishing for her family to be blessed with martyrdom (best shown in her attitude and self-reflection made in the commemoration of the other martyr), she avails herself of the tradition where she can inhabit and recreate the story of the death of her brother Mohammad as martyrdom, and of herself as a patient witness of it. Fatima sensed the

first tension between contentment (*ar-riḍā*) and grief (*ḥozon shadīd*) for the first time when she saw the other women related to the martyr (before she became one herself) crying and lamenting in deep sorrow over their loss. It is in this moment as she told me that she realized that martyrdom could indeed bring into tension different emotions, since although feeling extremely blessed and honored with the martyrdom, women might eventually suffer from the pain of loss as she remarked. However, aware of the challenge that such position might put on her, Fatima deliberately expressed her willingness to (“pay the price (*jāhze ‘adfa‘ al-thaman*)”). She also expressed her envy for the women (“I thought to myself ‘lucky them! (*niyyālun*)’”) and asked God to equally endow her with this blessing (“I looked at the sky and supplied to God ‘Oh Allah! When will be my turn? When?!’)”

Invited by the Islamic tradition and the social imaginary of the community to recognize the martyrdom and the patient witnessing for it as graceful, Fatima reasoned that since her grief will be ultimately “rewarded” then it was worth sacrificing for: “sacrifices must be made (*lāzim tin ‘amal taḍḥiyāt*)”.

Like most of my interlocutors, Fatima also expressed the idea that what was most shocking to her was the timing of the martyrdom and not the event itself (“not that I was not prepared to it”). In her case, the martyrdom of one of her brothers was expected (because both of them were going to Syria) and even was highly anticipated (“I noticed that not only do I accept this grief but I also wish for it”). Yet, she admitted that when she first learned about the martyrdom, “it was really hard to accept it (*kān sa‘ib ‘alayyī ‘ atqabbalu*)”. And, while claiming the pain as her own, Fatima acknowledged feeling briefly torn between contentment (an urge inside of her to smile) and grief in her bereavement process, a tension that was somehow quickly resolved with

a newly emerging feeling of being “serene and tranquil (*sakīna wa ṭama’ nīna*)” because her brother had been chosen as a martyr.

What seemed to bring this tension to closure was Fatima’s firm and deliberate decision to self-discipline to adapt to this new category of death: “I decided to stay collected<sup>39</sup> (*qarraret ’atamāsak*)”.

One additional factor that might have shaped the way Fatima experienced her grief in the first days following the news of her brother’s martyrdom and precisely this decision of staying collected was her sense of responsibility toward the other women in the family. Following from her obligation toward her mother and her two aunts, Fatima took on herself the responsibility to soothe their grief and hence acknowledged it was unacceptable to her to be “the weak one”.

“My mother lost her first son when he was only five years old. All our neighbors loved him. He was a special boy but he got electrocuted on (*’īd-al-’adhā*). And my mother also lost an uncle and a nephew. So, you see, she got shocked three times in her life. Now she has nervous breakdowns sometimes. There’s nothing wrong with her or anything of this sort but it was only hard on us to bring her the news of her son’s martyrdom. So when I received the news, I immediately knew that I cannot be the weak one. I had to soothe my mother’s grieving and give her solace (*muwāsāt*). I kept comforting her by reminding her repeatedly that this is what we long prayed for, that we spent days wishing in our (*du’ā*) that Allah would bless (*yubārik*) our family with a martyrdom man or even a wounded one. This is what we wished for my brothers. I asked her to be patient like all the other martyrs’ mothers. And at the same time, I had

---

<sup>39</sup>Analyzing Fatima’s choice of words in this statement could point further to the presence of tension and the way in which she tried to resolve it (metaphor – collected = something that was about to collapse and then it was put back together).

to ask for my two aunts' patience (*ṣabr*). My aunts are extremely attached to my siblings. One aunt does not have kids and the other one did not get married, and you know women who do not have kids of their own start forming deep bonds with other children in their family<sup>40</sup>. They were fond of Muhammad so I had to comfort them as well.”

And, invited by the tradition to think as the martyr as still alive, Fatima spoke passionately about the relationship that she still has with her brother:

“...Mohammad is still with me. He still listens to me and helps me. You know I do not feel the need to go visit his grave in Ozai where he is buried. To me, what are laying there are the remains of his *dunyā* body. His soul is always hovering around me.”

“Is he with us now?” I asked.

“Yes, I can feel him.” She crossed her hands on her chest as if she was hugging someone. “I am not exaggerating.”

She paused as if she was contemplating whether to share with me a thought or not. Then she smiled warmly and said: “The martyrdom requires a new pattern of grieving (*namaṭ jadīd lil-ḥidād*). I reached a point now where if I dream of my brother coming back to *al-dunyā*, it annoys me so much and I ask him furiously in my dream ‘why did you come back? You are a martyr! What are you doing here?!’”

In deciding to recreate herself as the sister of the martyr, Fatima does not only surrender herself to the specific way of grieving a martyr that is inspired by the Islamic tradition and encouraged by the community, she actively *seeks* to recreate adequately a

---

<sup>40</sup> This assumption is anchored in the subtexts of the community that a woman has a natural propensity (*maftūra*) for motherhood. And hence when a woman does not have children of her own she might compensate for what is considered to be a natural resulting void by as Fatima put it “forming deep bonds with other children in the family”.

“new pattern of grieving (*namaṭ jadīd lil-ḥidāḍ*)” in which grief itself, to a great extent, becomes repressed and replaced by contentment (*ar-riḍā*).

This new pattern of grief which does not seem to take into consideration a rigorous calibration of the two extremes of the tension gets condemned by Fatima’s aunts.

My aunts did not get this new pattern of grief. When they saw me playing with my young cousins a week after the martyrdom of my brother they yelled at me saying ‘you are acting as if what we lost is a small chicken!’ For them, grieving is so extreme, they cover their television with a black cloth and wear even black underwear. I told them that he is a martyr; we should celebrate (*lāzim naḥtafil*)! [...]

And as she got fully immersed in her new pattern of grief that conspicuously revolves around contentment (*ar-riḍā*) at the expense of grief, a discrepancy manifest itself between Fatima’s reality and that of her friend who came to give her condolences while wearing black. This visit was met with genuine confusion, followed by rejection, on the part of Fatima regarding her friend’s move and its meaning.

Even when my friend came visiting me that same week, I asked her ‘Why are you wearing black?’ It frankly did not occur to me that she might be wearing it to offer me her condolences (*t’azzīnī*). I told her that my brother is not dead, he is a martyr. ”

This is why as we already saw, even her continuous relationship with the martyr troubles her when it interferes with her new position as a sister of a martyr, like when she sees in her dream that he ceased to become a martyr and he came back to *al-dunyā*. This complex meaning-making that Fatima resorted to (and helped create) in order to answer the different obligations asked from her as the sister of the martyr in the first place and then as the daughter and the niece of women who also lost a dear one as a



martyr proved to be efficient in dealing with the tensions that first rose to the surface, although it has been slightly condemned or not shared with other women in her circles.

Now, I would like to contrast Fatima's story with that of my interlocutor Zaynabe who lost her fiancé in Syria, in order to show how this tension between grief and contentment might come into view even with another understanding of grief.

Although still relatively young, Zaynabe could be considered an accomplished woman. After pursuing her PhD in chemistry in Belgium, she came back to Lebanon and started a career of teaching at both a public and a private university. She believes that her serious personality and her rationality helped her survive this challenging workplace for a young woman. Since she felt that it is usually harder on women to gain the respect of their students and to impose discipline in their classrooms, especially when it comes to the freshmen. Although boundaries have also aided Zaynabe in her relation with her colleagues as she explained to me, it made things harder in her more intimate circles.

“I enjoy joking and having fun but I particularly dislike the vulgar jokes. I am also an extremely private person. My friends keep complaining how I know everything about them but how little they seem to know about me in return, and I tell them: ‘this is who I am’. Now, they just accept it. I am reserved, formal, and serious and my rationality overcomes my emotions.”

It is this personality that prevented Zaynabe for years to openly discuss her grief process even with her family. In fact, after her fiancé's martyrdom<sup>41</sup>, she flew back to Belgium because she felt that her parents' support was suffocating her.

---

<sup>41</sup> Zaynabe's fiancé became a martyr after the famous alleged Israeli strike in al-Quneitra in Syria. And during the entirety of our interview, she was cautious not to display any further identifiers of him.

“You know, in natural circumstances (she made the quotation mark sign with her fingers), I do not like to share my grieving story. I am a very reserved person (*'anā shakheṣ mutahaffiz*).” She stated as she fiercely looked me in the eye.

“So why did you agree on doing this then?” I asked.

“I believe in the humanization of the martyrs (*'ansanat as-ṣuhadā'*). I also believe that the experiences of the women related to the martyrs should be portrayed with accuracy and in a realistic way. Not as if they were saints like the mainstream media portrays them.”

I do not understand where this idea of the martyr as a saint (*qiddīs*) comes from. We are mythicizing the martyrdom experience (*'aṣṭaratu tajribati as-shahāda*) to the point that ordinary men do not feel that they can attain this level anymore and to the point that the women related to them feel obliged to process grief in a non-healthy way, oppressing their real emotions. I am with the humanization of the experience of the martyrs and that of the grief.

When I questioned Zaynabe further on her comment, she answered:

Women are repressing their grief to express ultimate contentment (*ar-riḍā*) because we are telling them that the martyrs are saint-like. We are putting this pressure on them (*niḥnā 'am niḍgathum*).

“How did you receive the news of his martyrdom?” I asked.

---

This how she narrated their meeting story “The story is weird. When I first went to Belgium in 2010 to pursue my higher education, I used to get really bored. Like really, there was nothing to do. Just work and home, home and work. So I created a false account on Facebook. Facebook was still widely unknown and I remember how my generation was so confused about how to use the site. I started adding people without any selective criteria whatsoever- it didn't matter who- I would select the mutual friends' list of my friends and add however is there (we laughed because this was not a very “rational” behavior after all). And that's how I added him. And we started chatting. But since the beginning, I was extremely honest with him. I told him about my true identity and what I was doing at that moment in my life. I didn't play games or lie and he did the same as well. That's how we fell in love.”

“The first and the strongest feeling that I experienced was being lost (*ḍayā* ‘). I felt lost (*ḥasset ḥālī ḍāy* ‘*a*). I felt as if I was standing on the edge of the mountain and it started crumbling and falling (*ḥasset ka ’innī wā’fe ’alā ḥaffet el-jabal w ballash yhizz w yū’a* ‘). I was sad and scared of course but mostly, I was lost. I kept thinking to myself: ‘what is your plan for *al-dunyā* now? What are going to do?’ The mountain collapsed and there was nothing I could do about it. “The mountain of everything I built with this person... of everything we built together.”

Zaynabe’ short answer did not encourage me to dwell further on this point so I asked about her experience in her fiancé’s funeral.

“I did not cry at the funeral. I heard other women whispering: ‘Maybe she did not love him that much’. I did not care. I knew how I was feeling and I hate for other people to see me crying. I used to cry at night, in my bed, all by myself...”

“So it did not bother you that the other women were questioning your love to him?”

“No, because I know that whatever it is that I would do, I would be criticized (*lah ’untaqad*). If I had cried a lot they would have thought that I am ungrateful to the gift of martyrdom (*mutanakkira li-hibat al-ṣahāda*), that I am showing off (*’asta’rid*) or that I am an exaggerator (*mubāliḡa*).”

“My family was very supportive. They were too kind with me to the point that I felt that I was suffocating. I flew back to Belgium when I first got the chance. I could not tolerate anyone showing me the slightest sign of pity or affection. I had to go.”

“And how was it there?”

“I was living with two of my closest friends at the time. I did not leave the house for a couple of months. They understood what I needed and did not pressure me in any way. I really appreciated it.”

“What happened when you came back to Lebanon?”

“The first few months I worked as a researcher assistant to a chemistry professor at X University. It really helped me. I would go to the laboratory and disconnect with the outer world. I lost myself in the chemical experiments that I used to observe and analyze.” She paused for a few seconds and smiled as she said: “I remember that, at that time, when I used to take the bus number 4 every day from my home to Hamra, I used to count all the shop names that had his name (meaning the martyr), and all the cars that were similar to his car.”

“Why would you do that?”

“It was a distraction strategy. It helped me diffuse my emotions (*ṣattit maṣā‘irī*) and not think about them. It was like a game that my mind invented. I had to count names and cars and if at the end I get an odd number, I loose. And then I had to look for more names and more cars again.”

“How are you feeling now?”

“Now I feel better.”

“Does his martyrdom influence your life at the moment?”

“Yes of course, I felt that he aided me getting my job and now at [another] university. And, when something does not work, I blame him. But mostly, I miss him, especially during the big events like the day I defended my PhD, and the first day I taught a class. I miss sharing with him the good memories. But I do not love him the same anymore. When a woman’s fiancé or husband becomes a martyr, she does not

cease to love him but the type of love changes. I do not know how to describe it. To me he is not a human anymore he is more of an idea (*bil-nesbe la 'ilī baṭṭal 'insān sār fikra*).”

“So you do not feel his presence?” I asked.

“No, and I do not actually understand the other women when they say: ‘we feel that our martyr is with us’. I would really like to go and ask them about what they truly mean when they say that. I sincerely feel curious about it. To me, martyrdom is like a chemical reaction, once it happens it is irreversible.<sup>42</sup>

Although Zaynabe’s interview is also very dense, I will only shed light on two points that caught my attention in relation to the first tension between contentment and grief.

The first one is Zaynabe’s call for a “humanization of the martyrs (*'ansanat as-suhadā*)””. One could see her condemnation of what she conceptualized as “mythicizing the martyrdom experience (*'aṣṭaratu tajribati as-shahāda*)” as a criticism directed at a prevalent form of belief in the community, which treats the martyrs as *quasi*-saint figures that are to be cherished but which nonetheless, according to her, makes martyrdom intangible to the *ordinary* men to whom emulating the ideal’s degree of piousness might prove to be extremely challenging. And therefore makes it harder on the women related to them to grieve as well.

In voicing such fear, Zaynabe was certainly also deriving observations from her own grief story in which, unlike in Fatima’s case, the continuous relation with the martyr did not materialize itself to her in the same way. For Fatima, her experience of

---

<sup>42</sup> She originally said “irreversible” in English.

her brother's soul as "still hovering around" considerably shaped the way she experienced and dealt with her grief as we already saw, in the sense that she does not visit her brother's grave in Ouzai for example because for her his body is not lying there. Moreover, she expressed feeling him around her constantly helping and supporting her. But Zaynabe, even though she availed herself of the same narrative of martyrdom to think about her fiancé's death, does not experience the same sentiment regarding her relationship to the martyr. She acknowledges the role the martyr plays in her most significant, successful milestones (and even blames him for the unsuccessful ones) but does not sense his presence on a daily basis. To her, her ex-fiancé "ceased to be human; he's more of an idea [...] It (martyrdom) is more of a chemical reaction, it is irreversible". This understanding might follow from Zaynabe's skepticism towards the supernatural dimension of the martyrs and might also have been affected by the type of the relation she initially had with him as her fiancé, since to her their love is still present but it changed its form. And while Fatima dealt with the grief tension by fully adopting contentment and to a great extent repressing grief (a behavior that Zaynabe condemned), Zaynabe did not seem to hold back from experiencing grief although she chose to do it in another country away from the "suffocating" attention of her family and the blaming eyes of the other women, being the reserved person she is.

The second point that caught my attention revolves exactly around this moment at the funeral where the other women, noticing that Zaynabe was not crying, accused her of not loving the martyr enough. Zaynabe's comment on this ("I know that whatever it is that I would do, I would be criticized (*lah' untaqad*). If I had cried a lot they would have thought that I am ungrateful to the gift of martyrdom (*mutanakkira li-hibat al-ṣahāda*), that I am showing off (*'asta'rid*) or that I am an exaggerator

*(mubāliġa)*”) indicates her awareness of the pressure put on her to attentively calibrate her response to martyrdom as a woman related to the martyr and consequently the double-bind such pressure imposes. And while Zaynabe blamed the mythicizing of martyrs for pushing women to repress their grief, she refused at the funeral to abide by the women’s indirect demand on her to actually showcase grief (by the medium of crying). I see such stance as articulated against the community’s effort of disciplining women’s grief, a critique at the “mythicizing of the martyrs” for not only pressuring men but also the women related to him by asking to perform and conform with a normative grief that is hardly tangible or achievable.

## CHAPTER II

### THE TENSION BETWEEN WORLDLINESS AND OTHERWORLDINESS

A second tension or paradox comes into sight when the women related to the martyrs claim this tragedy as their own and choose to endure and persevere through all the pain because of the *connection they feel that they have with the martyr*. As he occupies the liminal space of *in-betweenness* (in *al-barzakh*, between *al-dunyā* and *al-ākhirā*), the women become mediators between him and *al-dunyā*, *continuing witnesses of his endurance* after he departed this world and *bearers of his legacy in it*. Martyrdom itself surely can be seen as a radical form of renouncing *al-dunyā* in pursuit of God's closeness<sup>43</sup>. Being unauthorized to follow a similar path, women are condemned to *al-dunyā*, and must carry the burden of carrying into this world the memory of somebody else's renunciation of it.

While navigating this new trajectory, they find themselves in front of an existential dilemma that imposes on them yet another tension between worldliness, being in this world, and otherworldliness, renouncing it, were it only because of the relation they must maintain and make manifest to the relative now in the hereafter. Thus, they must constantly ensure that they are walking the thin line between not indulging too much in *al-dunyā* (because this could be forgetting their relative's

---

<sup>43</sup> However as I was conducting my fieldwork I came to a realization that unsettles such assumption. As I will show later in this chapter, there are many types of martyrdom that are deeply affected by the martyr's previous connection *al-dunyā* which then changed the way I perceived the role of the women in *al-dunyā* after the martyr's departure from it.



ultimate sacrifice), and at the same time not totally withdrawing from it, an imperative that stems in part from the manner in which the Islamic tradition frowns on asceticism as an adequate way to show gratitude for God's gift of existence and creatureliness<sup>44</sup>.

In this chapter, I will try to ethnographically document and illustrate the aforementioned assumptions through bringing to the fore the three main themes related to the second tension between worldliness and the otherworldliness.

Firstly, in order to illustrate *the continuous relationship to the martyrs* that my interlocutors experience, I will use the example of how the realm of dreams offers them both a landscape for connecting with their martyrs, and an opportunity for exercising being in this world and out of it.

Secondly, through evoking the story of a woman I will call Asmaa and the unique position that she occupies, I aim at showing what it exactly means for the women in the community to *bear witness to the martyr's martyrdom*. I will also use her story as an introduction to the struggle to calibrate between *al-dunyā* and *al-'ākhirā* induced by the martyrdom that my interlocutors experience in the emergence of their everyday lives.

Thirdly, I then recount Zahraa' story and merge her with that of Sarah, two women who lost their brother and husband respectively. Both stories instigate a discussion about how a woman can bear the legacy of the martyr and represent the righteousness of his cause in *al-dunyā* while being restricted by the constructions of gender in the community. While Sarah actively investigates the ways through which she can perform *jihād* and therefore become a martyr (*shahīda*) herself, Zahraa shares

---

<sup>44</sup> This need of keeping a constant engagement with the world have its origins as well in the complex relationship that martyrdom as a category originally have with *al-dunyā*.

her personal articulation of the concepts of *dunyā-dunyā* and *dunyā-ākhirā* that helped her soothe the tension between worldliness and otherworldliness and recalibrate her relation to *al- dunyā*.

### **The Continuous Relationship to the Martyrs**

In the second surah of the Qur'an, verse 154, Allah addresses the believers asking them not to think of the martyrs as dead even though they might not directly feel their presence: "Do not consider those who are slain for the cause of God to be dead. They are alive but you are unaware of them". (*Surah al-Baqarah*, verse 154)". But since this verse does not directly locate the exact realm that the martyrs inhabit, it implicitly invites the believers to give a certain kind of attention to the question of where the martyrs are, then. The realm of dreams offers for my interlocutors one route through which this question might be answered.

In the Islamic tradition, the spirit (*al-rūh*) is said to leave the body at the moment of death. Sleep however is thought of as the small death (*al-mawtu al- 'aşğar*), where the spirit detaches itself partly from the body and roams freely in preparation for the bigger death (*al- mawtu al- 'akbar*). In her book *Dreams that Matter: Egyptian landscapes of the imagination*<sup>45</sup> (Mittermaier, 2010), Amira Mittermaier argues that

---

<sup>45</sup> In her book "Dreams that Matter: Egyptian landscapes of the imagination", Amira Mittermaier argues that reading dreams through universalizing paradigms that equate all imaginations with false consciousness or hallucinatory projections is "itself a violent act that overlooks the dream-vision's ethical and political dimensions". In alignment with Hannah Arendt's understanding of politics as being also about the everyday activities, rituals, and beliefs of the individuals and the condition of being with others, Mittermaier argues against Freud's line of reasoning because for her it tends to disregard the dream's "material contexts, its potential as political commentary, its ethical implications, its narrative and performative renderings, its evocative power, its multiple interpretations and effects, and its religious and epistemological significance." Then throughout her books she demonstrates the ways in which dreams are reshaping political landscapes (in Egypt where she conducted her fieldwork) and vice-versa through affecting all the aforementioned dimensions by recounting and analyzing her interlocutors' dreams' experiences.

“sleep’s close kinship with death makes the dream a particularly fitting communicatory channel also between the living and the dead” since the dead reside in *al-barzakh* a place between *al-dunyā* and *al-’ākhira*. The dream in this way can become a liminal space of *in-betweenness*, which enables a continuous relationship between the dead who visit the living in what Mittermaier calls “the visitational dreams”.

To my interlocutors in Al-Dahiya, the visitational dreams of the martyrs offer a platform where their aliveness is “experienced and re-signified in invisible, imaginary realms” (Mittermaier, 2010) and is indeed rendered more tangible to them.

Against an approach that takes for granted the irrelevance of dreams to political and social matters<sup>46</sup>, and building on Mittermaier’s argument about the potentiality of

---

<sup>46</sup> Often reduced in modern Western scholarship to products of the human psyche, dreams are generally thought of as the manifestation of the desires and fantasies of the dreamer alone. For instance, a reading of one of the classic essays perhaps the most influential essay written on dreams in the modern era, namely, Sigmund Freud’s “The Interpretation of Dreams”, reveals that its author Sigmund Freud holds that dreams are a sort of a monologue that emerges from the subject’s unconscious mind. This mind being repressed during the waking day, unleashes its repressed desires in dreams who that do not necessarily abide neither by moral nor by ethical restrictions. This is the main reason why Freud posited that ethical considerations cannot extend into dream life and that they are suspended in the dream-world. Instead, he regarded dreams as the manifestation of our most a- or im-immoral desires and therefore disregarded all attempts at philosophizing dream ethics. Dreams for him were not only devoid of any ethical dimension but they can actually show us the most honest authentic version of ourselves which might prove in many cases to be unethical. Such psychologizing of dreams classifies them as asocial and apolitical mental products that have nothing to offer but to the dreamer herself and as “totally uninteresting to other people” (Freud 1955, 179). Thus, in a certain parallelism to the Cartesian mind-body split, this secularized episteme divorces dreams from the realm of the reality external to the subject and especially overshadows their possible ethical or political relevance to it.

Although many revisions were made to the Freudian analysis of dreams since the book’s publishing publication in 1900 (Freud, 1900), including by Freud himself, dreams remained almost exclusively discussed in psychology and rather vastly unexamined in Social Studies the social sciences except for some rare exceptions in anthropology.

Half a century later, Michel Foucault wrote one of his first essays “Dreams, Imagination and Existence” (Foucault, 1954) in which he conceptualized the “anthropology of the imagination”. He posited that “the dream is the birth of the world... the origin of existence itself” and argued that dreams should be approached neither as a “psychological symptom to be analyzed” nor the “signs of another world” but instead as “a vehicle that conducts the individual into a wider world of meaning and lived experience, even bearing ethical and political implications as it engages the dreamer with others”.

Foucault’s take on dreams paved a road for them to become a serious topic for anthropological inquiry. It inspired for example Amira Mittermaier’s work.

the *in-betweenness* of the visitational dreams, I explore in this section how dreams matter to the women related to the Hezbollah's martyrs especially since they enable a continuity of the relationship between them and their martyrs and, how they embroil them in a web of obligations. Most of Mittermaier's arguments resonate with what my interlocutors say, especially her observation of the potential of dreams: that they do not only deal with a past or present but also direct the dreamer toward the future, toward the "what might be". Those interpretations of the encounters with the martyrs offer an alternative possibility for not thinking of them as mere subconscious hallucinations but as visions that open a horizon of ethical guidance and suggestions for how to engage in the world in the physical absence of the martyr.

In this respect, I would like to focus in particular on one aspect of the visitational dream-visions of the martyrs: their ethical potential and implications. The engagement with the dream vision of the martyr result in ethical consequences and shifting practices for the women related to the Hezbollah's martyrs. As Fatima puts it: *"When I dream of the martyr Mohammad, I know that I should be really attentive because there are messages that he intends to deliver to me and that I better act upon them."*

What are the particular ethics that result from an understanding of the imagination according to which the martyrs are vivid contributors in the making of the present and the future? How do they guide? How do they inspire? How do they help? How do they soothe grief's pain? How do they enable the continuity of the relation to the martyr? How do they help in figuring out how to deal with the different tensions between worldliness and the other-worldliness?

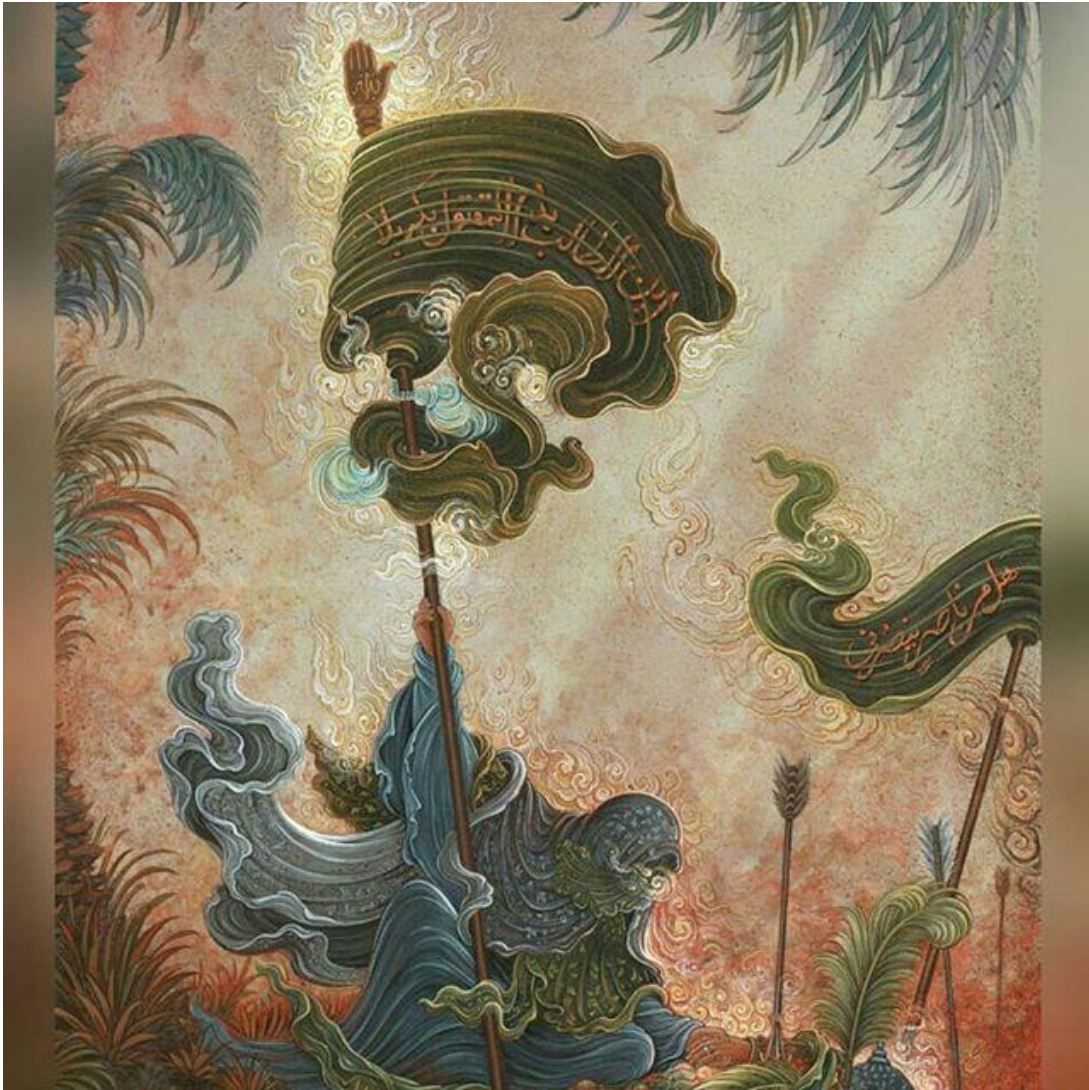


Figure 6: Al-Imam Al-Husayn in a Dream. *Painter: Unknown.*

### **Visitational Dream-Visions of the Martyrs**

Dream-visions of the martyrs have long been widespread in the community: I used to constantly hear them as I grew up to the extent that they almost became a sort of white noise to me. As a result, it was hard on me to be alerted to their ubiquity when I started to conduct my interviews for the thesis project. The dream stories managed to escape my attention, embarrassingly enough, until I sat down with my last interlocutor Sarah. Sarah's recounting of the dream vision of her husband triggered in my memory

all the other dreams that I had heard my other interlocutors narrating. When I went back to consult my field notes, I found out that almost all of my interlocutors did mention having had a personal encounter with the martyr himself through dreams or that one of their kin, friends or even complete strangers came to tell them that they “saw their martyr” in their dreams<sup>47</sup>.

After the martyrdom of her husband Husayn, Sarah<sup>48</sup> deliberately chose, as she told me, not to leave the house she shared with him in the same building above her in-laws because she was “not ready for it”. When she consulted her mother she immediately agreed with her since “it will soothe her pain”. Sarah’s in-laws were fully supportive of her decision as well. Husayn’s mother even told her: “When you leave, I will feel the grief of Husayn’s martyrdom a second time”.

Winter came. The cold season unexpectedly triggered many memories and Sarah felt an extreme sense of bereavement and nostalgia. It is with a downhearted tone that she told me:

“In the two winters we got to spend together, Husayn and I, we used to make tea and sit in the living room and chat. The first winter after his martyrdom, I decided neither to put the carpets on the floor nor to use the soba<sup>49</sup>. I thought to myself that this would trigger too many memories which were too much to deal with at that time. I chose not to tell anyone about my decision. But one week later, my friend called me to just ask me a couple of questions: ‘Did you put your carpets yet? Are you using the

---

<sup>47</sup> Not all my interlocutors have the same relation to “dream talk” or the interactions through dreams with the martyr. For example, Fatima is very prolix about it, speaks of it as if it was becoming almost a sort of habit, a dimension of her life, while for others it’s a one-time event that they preserve by not elaborating too much on it.

<sup>48</sup> I will recount Sarah’ story in detail in the third section of this chapter.

<sup>49</sup> A heating machine works on Diesel or on firewood.

soba?’ I was so confused. She continued saying: ‘I dreamt that I was visiting you and that Husayn was laying on the couch in your living room. He told me laughing: ‘Look Sarah is trying to freeze us! She refuses to put the soba on! Tell her something maybe she would listen to you, you are her friend’”.

Sarah felt a mild astonishment.

“I started crying really bad. But this time, those were not tears of sadness but tears of belief. I always knew that Husayn is still alive because he’s a martyr but this time I was assured that he was still looking after me, he was still with me and he will never leave. This dream made everything easier.”

Sarah recognized the “visitational”<sup>50</sup> dream that her friend had as a dream-vision and negated the possibility of it being a confused dream:

“I would have thought that it was just confused dream (*’adġāth ’ahlām*)<sup>51</sup> created by my friend’s subconscious mind if I had told her before, but since I did not inform anyone about my decision and no one visited me, I knew that it was a dream-vision (*ru’yā*)<sup>52</sup>”.

Following from this logic, Sarah interpreted this visitational dream-vision as a message from Husayn mediated to her by her friend’s imagination (*khayāl*) and she thus

---

<sup>50</sup> I use here the formulation of Mittermaier who calls “visitational” those dream-visions where a dead (usually a saint or the prophet) come visit the dream in her dreams.

<sup>51</sup> In the Islamic tradition, “confused dreams” is a Qur’anic concept that designates a kind of dreams that are not evoked by the divine and thus have no implications on the dreamer’s waking life.

<sup>52</sup> In the Islamic tradition, dream-visions (*ru’yā*) are considered to be divine revelations that bear the truth. The source of the ethical imperative of the visitational dream-visions is situated outside the individual and the visible social realm. As Zahraa told me “When someone dreams of the martyr, then it is *ru’ya*, it is the martyr himself. There’s no doubt about it.” So, in the visitational dream vision, the martyr himself addresses the dreamer.

felt compelled to perform what has been asked from her, to put the carpets and to light the soba<sup>53</sup>.

“When I knew that he (the martyr) visited my friend in her imagination (*khayāl*), I understood that his message is directed toward me and I immediately responded to his request.”

The visitational dream-vision of Husayn held also metaphorical ethical significance to Sarah. Notice for example how the carpets and the soba transcended their literal referents as she interpreted them as signifying her grief tensions.

“I knew that he (the martyr Husayn) wanted to say something more to me through this dream. It was not just about a carpet and a sofa. This was his way of telling me he wants me to remember him without harming myself. He wanted me to take care of Sarah as well.”

Sarah interpreted this dream as a sign that she needs to reflect on her ways of remembering the martyr. The visitational dream-vision of Husayn was clearly inciting her to deal with her grief differently. The dream “taught” her, as she shared with me:

“The sentiments of pride (*fakhr*) and bereavement (*hidād*) could go hand and hand and give me purpose instead of mental and emotional strain. I can feel the pain in my heart but still I have to take good care of myself and move on”.

Sarah’s dream was astonishing to me for many reasons. Not only did it help soothe two tensions (the first tension between contentment vs. grief as she shared in the

---

<sup>53</sup> What is very intriguing about Sarah’s story is that, unlike most of the dreams encountered mostly by Mittermaier during her fieldwork, Sarah’s dream was not properly speaking her own. It did not take place in her mind but in her friend’s. Such fact does not only render the reality of the dream vision more compelling to my interlocutors but it renders the message of the dream even more powerful. But in this case, should we say that this dream vision was not Sarah’s own and that it was her friend’s? Or is better to think of this dream as belonging to the realm of *in-betweenness* between both minds?



aforementioned statement, and the second tension between worldliness and otherworldliness as it invited her to engage back with the world through taking care of herself), but also because the moral imperatives that inspired her to do so did not extend from her but they rather *came* to her by the means of a dream (of which she is not the dreamer, her friend is). Sarah's account of this visitational dream-vision added a dimension to my anthropological quest in understanding how the women related to the Hezbollah's experience the continuous relation to their martyrs, and I soon realized that it was not an exception. I later noticed how many other dream narratives followed similar patterns and came to understand how while the imagination of these dreams was informed and structured to a large extent by the social imaginary of the community (including the tradition), it also often exceeded them.

In the following passage, I also recount a striking visitational dream-vision that Fatima shared with me.

“Do you frequently dream of him?” I asked.

“Oh yes! My dreams are so powerful [...] I saw once my brother Hassan committing a sin but I could not confront him because he is my older brother so I begged the martyr Mohammad in my dream to advise him. Do you know what happened? The next day, Hassan came to me in the morning and said ‘your message was delivered. Mohammad told me what you said to him’... I cried of happiness.”

“Why did you cry?” I asked.

“Because it reassured me that Mohammad is still with me. He still listens to me and helps me. You know I do not feel the need to go visit his grave in Ouzai’ where he is buried. To me, what are laying there are the remains of his dunya body. His soul is always hovering around me.”

“Is he with us now?” I asked.

“Yes, I can feel him.” She crossed her hands on her chest as if she was hugging someone.

Unlike Sarah’s dream which took place in her friend’s imagination without her direct or conscious solicitation, Fatima used her dream to actively seek the martyr’s assistance in advising her brother who was committing a sin. The martyr did respond and gave him a visitational dream-vision in which he announced that she was the instigator of the delivered message. The dream’s occurrence in someone else’s mind is a great context of actualization and learning for my interlocutors on the sacred state of the martyrs. And although they realize that the dream might be incited by their own thoughts, it does not become a mere outcome of their minds because, in many instances, the dream exceeds their own imagination and enriches it (for example when the martyr visits someone else’s dream and not theirs).

What’s more, both Sarah’s and Fatima’s dream-visions illustrate the way in which dreams allow for the resolution of certain quandaries that my interlocutors find themselves in after the martyrdom of their dear ones by offering the ethical guidance needed for them to resolve some of the tensions that arise during their grief process. For Sarah, the dream her friend had changed her in many ways. It allowed her to fully grasp, as she confessed to me, what it means for the martyr to be present spiritually while being physically absent. And, the way the dream exceeded her own imagination convinced her of the literal presence of the martyr and not only as a metaphor. Furthermore, he is “watching over” her and their “connection that now somehow transformed, is still in a way there”. So, although she is not his wife anymore, he still cares for her. The dream showed her that the right way to deal with grief was to stop

self-harm and to take care of herself. And that the martyr Husayn will always be present for assistance and for ethical guidance<sup>54</sup>.

My interlocutors have told me about important changes in their life trajectories triggered by dream visions. Zahraa<sup>55</sup>, for example, shared with me that upon getting asked for her hand she felt the urge to ask for the blessing of her brother the martyr Mohammad. Hence, she was determined to suspend any decision-making until he would send her a sign of approval. Zahraa waited, and made everyone wait for almost a fortnight. Then, a friend of her father, called him asking whether anyone is getting married in his family because he dreamt that the martyr was celebrating. When Zahraa's father recounted the dream to her she immediately accepted the man's marriage proposal and he is now her husband.

Visitational dream-visions of the martyrs offer a platform that could show the inescapable bindings to the martyr. They are both very informative and very compelling. They are here to inform the women on how to deal with the tensions that arise upon the martyrdom of the dear ones and they are resources from which the

---

<sup>54</sup> It is not always the case that the dream visions of the martyr soothe the grief pain of my interlocutors. Sometimes, they might invoke provoke further confusion, other times a sense of guilt. On one hand, Safiyya (an interlocutor) for example told me that when she sees her brother in her dreams her hearts aches because when she wakes up she realizes that "it was only a dream and nothing else". And although Fatima expressed gratitude towards the dream in which her brother helped her speak sense to their older brother to prevent him from committing a sin, she also communicated to me her frustration whenever she saw a dream of her brother in al-dunyā: "These dreams confuse me and make me uncomfortable. I hate seeing my brother in al-dunyā. I want to be the sister of the martyr. When I see my brother in my dream, I tell him: 'Please go back! What are you doing here? He always laughs and says: 'I can be wherever I want to be! It's none of your business!'" Zahraa, on the other hand, confessed that dream-visions of her brother make her feel guilty. Her busy schedule as a mom of two (one a newborn) and as a wife, a housekeeper and a radio host distracts her from the duty of properly remembering her brother. So whenever the martyr visits her in a dream, she realizes the extent to which she has been oblivious to his needs. And every single time, she wakes up with an overwhelming sense of guilt that she feels in her chest and her throat. Because, as it was brought to my attention by my interlocutors and as I grew up knowing, the martyr does not only respond to our requests: sometimes, the martyr might also find himself in a vulnerable position and might also seek our help.

<sup>55</sup> An interlocutor that I will introduce in the third section of this chapter.

women draw to deal with their quandaries associated with grief. What's more, those dreams as experienced by my interlocutors inspire them to find techniques of self-cultivation when they seek guidance. They motivate them to work harder on balancing between *al-dunyā* and *al-'ākhira*. These transformative effects that dream visions have on the women waking's lives are in the most part of an ethical nature.

Sarah's dream shows how dream-visions of the martyrs direct my interlocutors towards their private lives through ethical guidance, while Fatima's dream show how dreams could be embedded in even larger webs of reciprocity. Whether personal or communal, dream-visions of the martyrs can have direct political implications which exceed the autonomous subject in many ways. Namely because they gesture beyond linear temporalities, self-contained subjectivities and pre-delimited borders of *al-dunyā* and *al-'ākhira*.

### **Bearing Witness to Martyrdom**

We saw how dreams could offer a realm through which a continuous relation to the martyr is enabled. I now turn to the story of Asmaa to illustrate the concept of witnessing: an act that my interlocutors usually feel a responsibility to perform upon losing their man as a martyr.

#### ***Asmaa's Story***

Asmaa was not engaged to Salim before he died, they were just in love, and she was young, seventeen years old, but his martyrdom transformed her world.

Different from any other, Asmaa's story is *unique* not only because it pertains to a unique soul but also because it is a rare occurrence within her community. Salim, her

paternal cousin, her lover, and a devout Hezbollah fighter, as she describes him, died in Syria fighting ISIS which kept his remains and did not accept to reveal their place. Till the moment of the writing of this thesis, Salim's remains are still held captive by the organization.

### *A first Visit*

Salim had been *missing*, as Asmaa insists, for three years and six months, when I first came to know her. The daughter of a school bus driver and of a stay at home mom, she lives with her parents, her brother and her two younger siblings in their poorly equipped house in *Al- Dahiya*. When I first visited her on a wintry Friday morning, she was at school. Normally, a girl her age was supposed to be in college, but she failed the "Life Sciences" exams last year because she was still shocked from the death of Salim, as her mother told me over tea. '*He promised her that he will propose to her officially first thing when he comes back, but he never did*' said the kind hearted fifty three years old woman casually, while making sure that the sugar in my tea was as I liked it.

I went back to Asmaa's house in the afternoon. The elevator was busy so I took the stairs. This time, I turned the light on and saw the picture of the martyr Salim on the door. He was indeed good looking as his uncle and his wife, Asmaa's parents, described him to me in my first visit the same morning. This photo was taken for him in the battlefield, but I suspected it was posed. He was talking on the phone while holding it with his right hand; He wore an Emerald and silver ring on his ring finger<sup>56</sup>. I rang the

---

<sup>56</sup> Those precious stones are thought to have special spiritual effect on their wearer (like protection from the evil eye or attraction of abundance) and are widely worn among mostly observant men in the community.

bell. I could hear sounds of forks and smell fried fish. I heard footsteps. It was Asmaa who opened the door this time. She looked younger than I imagined. She was wearing funny furry pink pajamas with a big panda pattern on it<sup>57</sup> and walking barefoot. She smiled at me saying that her mother told her about my visit earlier. I did not take off my shoes this time and went directly without any guidance to the living room. Asmaa followed me and sat next to me on the sofa. She was beautiful, I thought to myself, with her naturally rosy cheeks and wide black eyes. Her hair was brown and silky, styled in a bun.

### ***Lost and never found***

Salim was a Hezbollah fighter who died in Syria at the hands of ISIS in Ramadan 2016. ISIS never revealed where his remains were but Hezbollah officially informed the family that he died, which left Asmaa in a deep confusion concerning the fate of her fiancé- to be.

Everyone says that I should move on (*lāzim 'itj āwaz al-mawdū'*) because he's not with us anymore but I refuse to believe them. Every day, when I am at school, I picture my mom telling me when I return back home that Salim is waiting for me on this couch and that he is alive. I cannot believe than he's dead until I see his remains. I always imagine him being still held by ISIS (*dā'ech*)<sup>58</sup>, maybe they are torturing him but he's alive.

---

<sup>57</sup> I remember being surprised when I saw her wearing this pajama because after her mother told me her daughter's grief story that same morning, I imagined that she would be wearing something dark and dull.

<sup>58</sup> *dā'ish* is the Arabic acronym for ISIS: *al-dawlah-al-'islāmiyyah fi-al-'Irāq wa-sh-Shām* (The Islamic state of Iraq and the Levant) and is the name that was widely used in the community and gained more traction than "Islamic State" who to them pejoratively confounded between a terrorist organization and their faith.

When I asked Asmaa how things would change if she sees Salim's remains, she answered immediately, without giving it a second thought:

It would change everything! My heart would cool off (*qalbī byibrod*)! It would be easier to know for sure that he is a martyr. I will know that he will intercede for me in the Day of the Resurrection (*yawm al-qiyaama*) and that my enduring did not go in vain. I would visit his grave and then move on.

The exegesis of this single statement allowed me to observe that what was particular to Asmaa's grief story and her inability to bring her grief to a closure was her seemingly incapability of completely *bearing witness herself* to the martyrdom of Salim, which might be seen as impeding her way in surrendering herself to the martyrdom narrative that would *cool her heart off* as she believes.

The etymological meaning of the word martyrdom in Arabic is worth examining closely, because martyrdom (*as-shahāda*) is "the act of bearing witness". Thus the martyr (*as-shahīd*) is primarily the witness. There are different interpretations on why the martyr is called *shahīd*, witness, in Islam. Many ulama interpret it as due to his soul that stays present after his death and hence "witnesses" life. Others interpret it as a symbol for God and angels' act of witnessing for the martyr's good deed in *al-'ākhirā*. Some interpretations go beyond that to claim that the *shahīd* witnesses (sees), while his soul is leaving his body, what God has prepared for him in Heaven as gifts and that the angels witness his death and bear witness to his good end (Al-Albani, 1995).

However, meeting Asmaa and listening to her story brought to my attention that the act of witnessing (through martyrdom) does not fall solely on the men who actively seek and endure it, but also on the women related to them. It falls on these

women to bear witness to their men's deaths and to embody after them the righteousness of their cause.

Other women in the community can bear witness in this sense to the martyrdom of their men: by being officially informed by Hezbollah that they died *for sure* on the battlefield, fighting the enemies of God and the land, their backs not turned on from fear, and by having the mortuary ritual organized by Hezbollah where the body of the dead fighter does not get washed<sup>59</sup>, and then proceeding by calling them “*shahīd*”, receiving their coffins with rose's petals and rice, ululating as if the mortuary ritual was a wedding ceremony. For Asmaa, it was impossible to follow a similar path. She only had the colorful posters made by their family of Salim in his battledress and shotgun, with the dome of Sayyida Zainabe's shrine photoshopped behind him, suggesting that he died defending her. But other than that, nothing clearly *materialized* the martyrdom of Salim to her. Therefore her act of witnessing was incomplete.

This is why, during our conversation, Asmaa would easily alternate between two narratives: On the one hand, she would suggest that Salim was indeed a martyr, referring to him in the past tense and attributing his qualities to the profile of a man that Allah would choose as a martyr.

---

<sup>59</sup> It is requested *wājib* in the Islamic tradition that the dead's body gets washed *gusul al-mayyet* before shrouding it.

However, ‘Abd-Allaah ibn Tha’labah narrated that the Prophet said about martyrs’ washing: “Leave them with their blood, for there is no wound incurred for the sake of Allaah, but he will come on the Day of Resurrection bleeding with a colour like the colour of blood but its fragrance will be like the fragrance of musk.” Narrated by al-Nasaa’i; classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh al-Jaami’, 3573

Another hadith indicates that: “Martyr should neither be washed, nor shrouded nor prayed for *al-shahīd lā yuḡsal wa lā yukaffan wa lā yuṣallā ‘alayhi*” as livings should “leave the martyrdom marks on their bodies” and “angels will then wash their bodies in the skies” (Al-Albani, 1995)



He was so gentle and kind. I believe that all martyrs have the kindest hearts; this is why Allah chooses them among all the other men to console *Ahl-al-Bayt*.

On the other hand, she would completely reject the idea of his martyrdom because of the absence of a material indicator such as a grave.

“My best friend Batoul's story resembles mine, she was to be engaged to a martyr before he went to Syria and died, but she forgot him and she's now engaged to another man”.

When I asked her why Batoul could forget him and she could not she uttered:

“Because she was not in love with the martyr, they were just starting to get to know each other, they did not talk about any future plans and because there is a grave for him. *She knew for sure that he became a martyr (ta'akkadet 'innu shahīd)* I have no grave for Salim. I feel like his soul is still with me”.

In the tradition, the dead occupy a state of *in-betweenness* in *al-barzakh*. And although they interact with the living, they are thought to belong to the realm of *al-'ākhira* more than to that of *al-dunyā*. However, prohibited to think of the martyrs as dead (“And do not think of those killed in Allah’s path as dead...<sup>60</sup>”), my interlocutors are invited by the tradition to think of their martyrs as alive (“indeed they are alive and receive their sustenance from their Lord”). Perhaps for this reason, their *in-betweenness* leans more towards *al-dunyā* than towards *al-'ākhira*.

So when Asmaa tries to avail herself of the tradition that invites her to recognize the *in-betweenness* of the martyr, like the other women in her community, she finds herself in a challenging position. Her incapacity to fully bear witness to the

---

<sup>60</sup> “And do not think of those killed in Allah’s path as dead: indeed they are alive and receive their sustenance from their Lord. They rejoice in the bounty provided by Allah”. (Surah 3, Aal-e Imran verse 169-170).

martyrdom of Salim intensifies his in-betweenness and makes him even more of alive to her than dead. However, having to repeatedly consider the option of the martyrdom of Salim, she has to shift her focus to this life to “protect his legacy” and “fulfill his will” as she told me. Hence she is trapped in a position that accentuates this second tension between worldliness and otherworldliness. When I asked Asmaa if the pain started fading away after all this time she answered:

No it did not. I barely eat, and not because I want it but because it is *ḥarām*<sup>61</sup> that I starve myself to death. But I eat without any pleasure (*balā nafīs*). I used to hate hot pepper but now I don't mind eating large quantities of it, I don't feel its taste in my mouth anymore. My sister took me to Italy too last summer because she thought that I was depressed (*mukta'iba*), she has a wealthy husband so she planned a whole trip to Rome for me. I did not enjoy it. I faked that I was happy the whole time because I did not want to disappoint her (*mā kān baddī khayyib 'amalhā*) because she tried too hard to please me. But deep inside of me, I was so sad. The only moment when I felt a bit happy was when we were on the plane. I am scared in Fantasy World<sup>62</sup> but because I was so sad, the plane did not scare me. I enjoyed flying above the earth between the clouds, far away from everything, especially from my pain and getting closer to Salim.

[...]

Even if he's dead he's not a regular dead. He is a martyr. He will always be here watching me over, so I should protect his legacy (*'iḥmī 'irtu*) and fulfill his will (*naffid wasiyytu*) by executing what he wanted me to do and be how he wanted me to be.

---

<sup>61</sup> The imperative in Islam to take care of oneself because we are God's creation.

<sup>62</sup> A famous amusement park in Al-Dahiya.

In these two passages selected from my conversation with Asmaa , one can easily observe the second tension taking shape between the imperative to be worldly, encouraged by the Islamic tradition (*I barely eat, and not because I want it but because it is ḥarām that I starve myself to death*) and occasionally performed in response to various kinds of obligations like kinship (the example in this case could be Asmaa's acceptance of her sister's offer to travel to Rome although she did not initially want to); and the otherworldliness attached mainly to her impulse to project her current existence into the afterlife (*I enjoyed flying above the earth between the clouds, far away from everything, especially from my pain and getting closer to Salim*), which traps Asmaa in a world that Salim has left, where she feels the obligation to bear witness to his martyrdom and to stand for it by carrying his legacy (*He will always be here watching me over, so I should protect his legacy and fulfill his will by executing what he wanted me to do and be how he wanted me to be.*"); hence mediating his otherworldly presence in al-*dunyā*.

Building on Asmaa's story, in what follows, I will be looking into ways in which my interlocutors Sarah and Zahraa manage to respond to two conflicting needs upon the martyrdom of their dear ones: the need of being present in this world (for example by honoring responding to one's relatives expression of care) and the need to withdraw from it (for example by showing a disinterest in pursuing a worldly pleasure sometimes like enjoying food or new experiences like traveling). How do they manage to preserve the delicate line between indulging themselves in al-*dunyā* or totally withdrawing from it by seeking refuge in *al'-ākhira*, with the risk of coming to live a *quasi*-ascetic life? How does the everyday life challenge them in this manner? What are the duties of kinship, including in tradition, especially in aiding these women when they

struggle to be in the world? One cannot for example be a perpetual bore to the rest of the family or be disinterested in her health or her education, so how do they try to bring them back in the world? Do my interlocutors understand pain as a sign of being in the world or as something that separates them from it? In what ways can my interlocutors bring worldliness and otherworldliness in an almost constant contact in their everyday? Why is it important for them to calibrate those two needs? In which ways their social world and the Islamic tradition (renouncement of asceticism for example) lead them in this direction?

### **Bearing of the legacy of the martyrs**

“What role do you think you play now as the sister of the martyr?” I asked.

Fatima answered: “I feel like I have his legacy to protect (*‘indī ‘irthu w lāzim ‘ihmī*). It is a big responsibility, like I have a custodianship over his martyrdom (*‘indī ḥaḍāna ‘alā shahādtu*). I have to follow the path and to soothe (*haddī*) the other women related to the martyrs and give them constant solace (*muwāsāt*) and support (*da‘im*).”

Women in the community often echo Fatima’s sentiment in the feeling of obligation that she has toward the martyr (protecting his legacy, having “a custodianship over his martyrdom), toward his path (“follow the path”) and toward other women related to the martyrs in the community (soothing them and giving them constant solace and support).

Opening the third section of this chapter with Fatima’s statement illustrates how difficult it can be to properly elucidate such rich concepts in a short segment. For this

reason, I chose to restrict my attention to two specific set of questions in relation to the tension between worldliness and otherworldliness that this chapter is exploring.

Firstly, how do my interlocutors bring themselves back to (*al-dunyā*) after the alienation from the world to which their bereavement made them vulnerable? Even after believing and experiencing a continuous relationship to the martyr and bearing witness to his martyrdom, my interlocutors walked me through the arduous journey they had to endure in order to find “their right place” in (*al-dunyā*) after the martyr’s departure from it. This is so because martyrdom changes his relation to (*al-dunyā*) and strongly invites them to reflect on their own.

Secondly, what kind of (*al-dunyā*) my interlocutors then choose to inhabit? And how do they become bearers of the legacy of the martyr while being restricted by the gender norms of the community? Does martyrdom incite them to challenge or to conform to societal norms of gender? How do they appropriate *jihād* and seek to become martyrs (*shahīdāt*) themselves?

To explore these questions, I will evoke two stories: that of Sarah and Zahraa.

### ***Sarah’s story***

Sarah was the first interlocutor I met for this study, and at the time I met her, she was writing her MA thesis, to earn a Social Work degree at a prestigious university (we shall see later on how the martyrdom of her husband affected the process of her thesis writing). She is 24 year old, wears a *chador* that covers her tall, thin figure, and she works as a psychological counselor for children at one of Hezbollah’s affiliated schools in *al- Dahiya*.

When we were talking, a pattern emerged whereby she would hide her hands under the table whenever she felt a sort of uneasiness. And when they would finally come out again to rest on the surface of the table, her fingers would repeatedly touch the plain golden wedding ring that she still wears and keeps polished even two years after Husayn's martyrdom<sup>63</sup>. Sarah insisted that her husband's name is (*husayn*) and not (*hseen*) as it is commonly pronounced in the Southern Lebanese dialect.

“My mother-in-law's pregnancy with Husayn was difficult so she vowed him (*nadaritū*) to Imam Husayn so he would become his servant (*khadimu*). He grew up and he eventually honored the vow (*wafā al-nidr*) with his martyrdom. That's why he is (*husayn*) and not (*hseen*)”<sup>64</sup>.

Sarah's husband Husayn died quite unexpectedly because he was not a full-time Hezbollah affiliate<sup>65</sup>. She described in detail how much time she got to spend with him.

“I got to know him (*fatarat ta'aruf*) for almost six months before we got engaged (*katb kitāb*) for two years and then we got married. So altogether, we were together for almost four years and a half *only*”.

---

<sup>63</sup> Hussayn was killed in Tadmur, Syria in 2016. He was not a full time fighter, but he was affiliated with the Pedagogical Mobilization of Hezbollah (Al- Taabia Al-Tarbawiyya Hezbollah).

<sup>64</sup> This insistence on using the Fusha pronunciation of this name could denote an advanced degree of closeness between the person (Sarah's husband) and the person he is named after (*al-'imām al- husayn*) in comparison with the (*'āmmiyya*) pronunciation that suggests that although the name has been inspired by the same figure, it went through a certain deviation (phonetically) and gained another life-world on its own.

<sup>65</sup> Usually, full-time Hezbollah soldiers are the first ones to be sent to the front and not part-time affiliates.

What Sarah described is somehow the usual timeline that most serious romantic relationships in *Al-Dahiya* usually abide by, with variations in the duration for each stage. But, the sudden time disjuncture that their relationship underwent (and not that the fact he fell as a martyr) was “shocking” as she told me twice.

“The martyrdom of Husayn did not shock me (*mā ṣadamitnī*). I was certain that the natural fate (*al-qadar al-ṭabī‘ī*) for someone with his special traits was to be a martyr. I was only shocked by the timing. I honestly did not expect it to happen this fast. I felt mournful (*ḥasset bi-ḥidād*) because we didn’t get to spend more time together and share a longer journey but not because he fell as a martyr”.

Sarah is reiterating the same idea that both Fatima and Zaynabe also expressed about the timing being the shocking factor and not the martyrdom. In fact, she told me that martyrdom was a blessing that she wished upon everyone she loved and she deemed her occasional wishes for Husayn to be with here in (*al-dunyā*) as selfish.

“If I had to choose, I would choose martyrdom again for Husayn because I wish it (*batamannāhā*) for everyone I love. For me, a long life without martyrdom (*shahāda*) is worse than a short life with *shahāda*. Because I am a firm believer that the age is destined (*al-‘umūr maktūb*). So, martyrdom is a blessing (*al-shahāda ni‘ma*). I would have been selfish if I wanted Husayn for my (*dunyā*), because he is now much happier than when he was here with me. Sometimes, I wish him for my *dunyā* happiness (*sa‘ādātī al-dunyawiyya*), but my mind is convinced (‘*aqlī muqtani*’) that I do not want to be selfish (‘*anāniyya*’).

Sarah described her life with Husayn as a calm, happy life. When he first proposed to her, she accepted based on traits she found in him that she expected in her future husband. She described him as ethical (*khalūq*), courteous (*muhaddāb*), observant

(*multazim*) and ambitious. She fell in love with him quickly and marriage made their love “flourish” even more.

Husayn’s parents were wealthy merchants in Africa. This is how he afforded studying chemistry in an elite Lebanese university and owning a house at a young age. In fact, he built an apartment just above his parents’. But although he grew up in a wealthy family, he insisted on taking up a lot of responsibilities, Sarah told me. After getting married, they both started to private tutor eleven children at their home. He was teaching seven students and she was teaching four, and with a little financial assistance from her in-laws, Sarah and Husayn were steadily building their life together. They were even starting to consider having kids. “But Allah’s plan was different”, Sarah sighed.

### ***Allah’s Plan***

Before Husayn’s martyrdom, Sarah felt that something was going to happen. He went to Syria for a few weeks and was supposed to come back on a specific day. But when Sarah called him to ask him what he would like her to cook for him, his line was closed. So she cleaned the house and waited. On that morning, her parents visited her. And as they were returning to their house in the South, they turned the car back and knocked on her door again. This is when she knew for sure that something had happened. Later that evening, a group of “very friendly” women visited Sarah in her house and officially informed her that her husband had become a martyr. They told her that she was blessed (*baraka*) with the gift of consoling (*muwāsāt*) Sayyida Zaynabe and must therefore, like her, exhibit patience (*ṣabr*).



“The first week after his martyrdom, I could not talk about him or about my feelings. People told me ‘speak and you shall be relieved (*’ihkī btirtāhī’*), but I found it to be difficult (*’istaṣ ’abthā*)<sup>66</sup>. When he first fell as a martyr, it was kind of hard for me. I used to pray for him to die as a martyr (*tkūn khātimtū as-shahāda*). But I was shocked, I expected us to have a longer life together and to have kids. And I was working towards this goal (*kint ’ishtighil ’ala hal ’asās*). Even Husayn was planning to live a longer life”.

Sarah remembers thinking to herself:

“What should I do now? Husain was the axis of my life (*kān miḥwar ḥayātī*) (She drew a small circle with her index finger in the air). His loss was very hard on me because I lost this axis”<sup>67</sup>.

[...]

“I had days were I was depressed<sup>68</sup>. This period was black (*hal fatra kānet*) (*sawdā*), I did not want to leave the house”.

But Sarah did not dwell on what she experienced in this period. She immediately said after that:

---

<sup>66</sup> In my interview with Sarah I sensed that she did not feel comfortable to further dwell on more details of these first days of the grief process with me, as opposed to Asmaa for example.

<sup>67</sup> As we saw before with Fatima and Zaynabe, see with Sarah here and will see with Zahraa in the following section, I was a bit surprised when all of my interlocutors with no exception recognized the central role that the martyr played in their life before their death. And in my effort to analyze it, I find it a bit hard whether to locate this affection and dependency to the martyr in him being God’s chosen man or in the overall patriarchal aspect of the society which enforces a sense of dependency on and idolization of men in general.

For instance, It is worth examining this sense of being lost that also all of my interlocutors experienced due partly to the tensions and in other part to the pivotal role the martyr as a male relative used to play in their lives as a brother, as a lover or as a husband.

<sup>68</sup> She originally used the word “depressed” in English.

I fought so as not to drown (*ḥārabet ta-mā 'iğraq*). I was afraid of falling (*khifet 'ūqa*). I had to fight”.

By saying “I had to fight”, Sarah was acknowledging the fact that she had to actively deploy efforts in order to re-calibrate her life after the martyrdom. I understand Sarah’s metaphor “I fought so as not to drown (*ḥārabet ta-mā 'iğraq*). I was afraid of falling (*khifet 'ūqa*)” as congruent with the metaphor of the righteous path (*as-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) that is deeply ingrained in the imaginary of the community, as I discussed in previous chapters. Undergirding Sarah’s fear of feeling depressed, barely eating and not leaving the house is a fear of withdrawing from *al-dunyā*, which originally stems from Islam’s disfavor of asceticism as a proper way of being in the world. Yet, when Sarah was conveying the tension she was feeling owing to the fact that she did not know how to practically come back to *al-dunyā*, she resorted to compare herself to the martyr in his relation between *al-dunyā* and *al-'ākhira*. The logic she deployed in the following passage of our interview drew my attention to yet another important aspect of the women’s relation to martyrs.

**“How can I practically come back to *al-dunyā*”?**

“I felt a tension (*ḥasset bi- ṣirā*). I did not know how to practically (*'amaliyyan*) come back to (*al-dunyā*). I asked myself: how should I think of (*al-dunyā*) now? And for days I thought about the answer. I thought and I thought. And then I decided to contemplate how Husayn was and try to emulate him (*'atamattal fī*). God chose him as a martyr so he must have really deserved it (*mustaḥiqq*) and must have had a healthy relationship (*'alāqa salīma*) to *al-dunyā* and *al-'ākhira*”.

[...]

“He was not desperate or depressed. He used to plan a lot for the future. He even got admitted into the Council of Civil Service. And this is enough evidence that he was looking for stability in *al-dunyā* and that he was not running away from anything. Still, his eyes were always fixed on *al-’ākhira*. He was a living embodiment (*tajsīd ḥayy*) of Imam Ali’s (PBUH) saying: “Work for your *dunyā* as if you will live forever, and work for your *’ākhira* as if you will die tomorrow (*’i ’mal li dunyāka ka ’annaka ta ’īshu ’abadan wa ’i ’mal li- ’ākhiratika ka ’annaka tamūtu ḡadan*)”

Even though the other women told Sarah to “be like Sayyida Zaynabe”, the above statement shows that it was hard for her to “practically” bring her attention to *al-dunyā* in her everyday life. I argue that the absence of a fully-fledged model of Sayyida Zaynabe to emulate (due to the lack of sources on her and on other women in the history of Islam) put women into tension in their everyday lives, especially concerning the question about how to “practically” comeback to *al-dunyā*, now that the martyrdom directed them toward *al-’ākhira*. They are thus invited to resort to creative ways through which they can fashion themselves. Sarah, for example, found in Husayn’s life a tangible and an accessible resource to emulate. When she shared with me how she reasoned to find her own answers, it resonated with statements made by my other interlocutors and women in the community who, in bearing witness to the martyr’s martyrdom, bear witness to the way he lived as well.

In the community, an essential part of the responsibility of bearing witness to the martyr’s martyrdom is to acknowledge the high standing of the martyr and his worth in the eyes of the Creator. Another more subtle part of witnessing is to bear witness to the fact that the martyr’s relationship to *al-dunyā* and *al-’ākhira* was balanced or “healthy (*salīma*)” in the words of my interlocutor Sarah.

This somewhat recurrent pattern made me inquire whether there are other types of martyrdom, which might incite my interlocutors to emphasize that the martyr belonged to one of them and not the others. My quest was fruitful because after looking into some resources, I understood that the Islamic tradition recognizes three types of martyrdom.

The first one is the martyr of *al-dunyā* and *al-'ākhira*: is the one who dies on the battlefield, fighting the enemies of Allah, “trying to rise His word (*li-takūn kalimatu 'allāh hiya al-'ulyā*) over that of the unbelievers (*al-kuffār*)” with a pure intention, without having any greedy or selfish desires in acquiring wealth or power through the battle<sup>69</sup>. This is considered to be the highest category of martyrdom for it encompasses the spiritual and material *jihād*. The martyr’s body gets neither shrouded nor washed; he attains the highest levels in heaven and intercedes for many (a capacity that only prophets and imams usually have access to).

The second one is the martyr of *al-dunyā*: is the one, who was killed in a fight with the enemies of Allah, but “his intention was focused on getting a war prize or any other worldly goal, or he was a hypocrite murderer (*qātil riyā*), or was motivated by fanaticism (*'aṣabiyya*) and vengeance (*'intiqām*) and not focused on rising God’s word. And because only God knows the true intention of this martyr, he gets rewarded in *al-dunyā* by the other believers by being treated the same way the martyr of *al-dunyā* and *al-'ākhira* gets treated, because Allah does not reveal his true intentions to them, but he will get punished in *al-'ākhira* for being a hypocrite.

---

<sup>69</sup> “A man came to the Prophet and asked him: A man is fighting for a war prize, another is fighting to be cherished, and the third one is fighting to ensure his place in the hereafter, which one of them is fighting for the path of Allah? The prophet answered: The one who fought to make the world of Allah the supreme one is the one fighting for God’s sake” (Reference to be included)

The third one is the martyr of *al-'ākhira* and is a category which encompasses those who were unjustly murdered or those who died drowning or burning, the women who died while giving birth, and people who die due to a disease. Their bodies are washed and shrouded just like the regular Muslim dead but they receive great mercy from God on the Day of the Resurrection and they are sent to heaven. However, their status does not attain that of the first category of martyrdom.

Thus, in the first place, the act of bearing witness to a martyr's martyrdom only becomes valid if the woman *proves* (even in subtle ways<sup>70</sup>) that her martyr belonged to this first category of martyrdom "a martyr of *al-dunyā* and *al-'ākhira*"; and thus, that he had a somewhat balanced relationship to *al-dunyā* and *al-'ākhira*<sup>71</sup>.

How does this become relevant to the act of bearing legacy after a martyr's departure from *al-dunyā*? The answer could be found in Sarah's answer to herself. In emulating the martyr, she has to emulate his relationship to *al-dunyā* and *al-'ākhira* and focus on both. So, although Sarah affirmed the dedication with which Husayn fought on the battlefield, she made sure as well to insist that "he was looking for stability in *al-dunyā* and that he was not running away from anything". Moreover, my interlocutor Zaynabe for example (whose story I will tell next) told me that God chose her brother Mohammad as a martyr because "he had a pure intention (*niyya khāliṣa*) to Allah almighty. Even when he pursued what one might think of as *al-dunyā* matter like taking

---

<sup>70</sup> Like Sarah mentioning how the martyr was looking for stability in *al-dunyā*, meaning that Husayn was not running away from anything and was not looking for a selfish worldly goal to be accomplished through his fighting (like money or status).

<sup>71</sup> Because this kind of martyr does not go to the battlefield to run away from *al-dunyā*. On the complete opposite, his intention should be that of raising God's word in *al-dunyā*, which is by itself also an *'ākhira* oriented goal.

care of his daughter or loving his wife or studying, he directs his intention towards Allah and *al- 'ākhira*".

And because in the eyes of the God, this is the most honorable martyrdom, the martyr's ways of living and dying become the most honorable and the most righteous, and since it falls on the women to embody the righteousness of his cause and bear witness to his legacy, they feel invited to emulate his way of being in the world after his martyrdom.

This need to come back to *al-dunyā* after the martyrdom of one's relative in the community is vital to the women's understanding of their grief which is followed later by a perseverant endeavor of self-fashioning.

For example, after Sarah walked me through the way in which she reflected in a dialogue with herself about how to "practically come back to *al-dunyā*", she told me:

"It took me a while before I was able to re-calibrate (*raklajit*) my life. I did not know how to apply the same balance between *al-dunyā* and *al- 'ākhira* that Husayn's martyrdom was forcing *jabaritnī* me to inhabit (*'askun*). He was so focused on this life: working, teaching, studying and taking care of his family and friends and yet his focus on the afterlife (*mā ba 'da hāḍihi al- ḥayāt*) led him to martyrdom. He was working for (*his 'ākhira*) as well. But then his martyrdom taught me how. I started thinking to myself: remember how Husayn was and be like him, inhabit his traits (*talabbasī ṣifātu*)".

Two weeks later, Sarah came back to the university. As she was walking its main gate she thought to herself: "Husayn does not accept that I withdraw from *al-dunyā* just because he left it"<sup>72</sup>.

---

<sup>72</sup> On returning to the university, Sarah commented: "Even the people at my university (prestigious secular university) were considerate and they encouraged me to move on even though for them the whole

But, as Husayn's martyrdom was strongly directing Sarah's thinking also toward *al-'ākhira* (she told me: "The martyrdom of Husayn made me more focused because it rendered me aware that I do not have time and that I should work on myself to strengthen my religion and my culture"), what kind of *al-dunyā* was left for her to live?

Being unauthorized by the tradition to follow a similar path (e.g. going to the battlefield), Sarah started looking for ways in which she could emulate what a martyr of *al-dunyā* and *al-'ākhira* stands for, even if metaphorically. She asked herself: "How can I become a martyr (*shahīda*) myself?"

***"How can I become a martyr (shahīd) myself?"***

"I thought that his martyrdom would be indeed a testimony (*hojja*) on me on the Day of the Resurrection (*yawm-al-kiyāma*) and that Allah would ask me: How did you benefit from this experience of your husband's martyrdom? Also I asked myself: How can I be a martyr (*shahīda*) myself? How should I change my perspective on my *dunyā* and my *'ākhira* to deserve this same ending (*khātima*) as Husayn? I did serious research to figure the answer. It did not come to me by itself (*mā 'ijānī al-jawāb lawahdū*).

Martyrdom is a degree that one could reach. Death is destined *maktūb* for humans whether it is on a battlefield or in a car accident. So martyrdom in the

---

Hezbollah intervention in Syria was condemned (*mustahjan*). Many of my professors tried to console me and they admired my patience (*madaḥū bi-ṣabrī*).

I was a bit scared of how they might react to the news. They told me that he was young and asked how I let him go. But their comments did not hurt me. I told myself that for me this was the right thing to do and that they should accept it (*yitqabbalū*). I understood that it was only normal that they act this way because they come from a different environment (*hinnī min ġeer bī'a*) and my major includes a lot of psychology so I understand their reaction".

battlefield is the easy *Jihād* but there is a much more difficult one which is *Jihād-el-nafs*. This *Jihād* for a woman is with her husband and children. And this is why I found it to be difficult because I lost my husband and I do not have kids. So what is my *Jihād* then?

I could not implement this idea of *Jihād* in my life so I started looking for other ways to cherish my husband's path (*karris masīrtu*) if I cannot go to the battlefield and if I do not have a husband and kids.

I started searching for a role to play (*fattish 'ā dor mārsu*). So I decided to use my academic major to counsel children in my community whose fathers become martyrs. And I decided to write my thesis on a similar topic to benefit those kids. Because even if martyrdom is beautiful, we cannot deny that it has unavoidable negative effects (*'āthār salbiyyeh māfī mahrab minhā*), especially on kids<sup>73</sup>.

Sarah's belief that a woman's *jihād* is with her husband and children is widely resonated in the community. I remember as a young girl (around 12 year old) taking lessons at the Pedagogical Organization of Hezbollah, that I got assigned with my classmates (all young girls like me) to make a plan that would predict how we would like to live our most self-actualized lives if our ultimate goal would be pleasing God and going to Heaven. During the presentations, *all* of us mentioned wanting to practice *jihād* through being obedient (*muṭī'a*) and patient (*ṣabūra*) wives, and raising our kids in accordance with the Islamic teachings, for them to be *Husayniyyin* and *Zaynabiyyat*. The premise on which such practices repose, e.g. wanting to get married and have kids in the first place, was to a great extent taken for granted.

---

<sup>73</sup> Usually my interlocutors exempted kids from judgment when speaking about how families should receive the news of their men's martyrdom.



Sarah told me that she initially chose her major (Social Work) to benefit her own kids in the future. It was not until she lost her husband and the temporal option of having kids that she felt obliged to look for other ways through which she could self-actualize outside the private realm of her marital house<sup>74</sup>.

I now turn to Zahraa's story which complements that of Sarah in many ways and explores similar themes as well.

### ***Zahraa's story***

Zahraa is the sister of the martyr Mohammad and she is consistently proud of it. When she had to present a speech for his first year commemoration in (*mujamma' sayyid al-shuhadā'*), the organizers asked her "How would you like us to introduce you, as the sister of the martyr or Zahraa [family name] the Journalist?" She could not understand how someone might even ask this question.

There is neither greater nor more glorious title than the sister of the martyr (*māfi 'a'zam 'aw 'ajall min laqab 'ikht as-shahīd*). "When my brother became a martyr I peaked (*waṣalet 'al-durwa*). No matter what accomplishments I might be capable of attaining in the future, they will surely fail in granting me a greater honor, and nothing will surmount this glory 'izza of being the sister of a martyr".

Zahraa's sentiment is widely echoed in the community among the women related to the martyrs and many of my interlocutors expressed to me (like Fatima for example) that, in the period preceding the martyrdom of their relative, they had long prayed that God would endow them with such a blessing.

---

<sup>74</sup> Even before that, Sarah was also directed (by the Islamic tradition) to benefit her community and she had this goal in mind, but its most immediate channeling was through her husband and kids.

Before her brother's martyrdom, Zahra was visiting the (*rawḍat as-shahīdayn*)<sup>75</sup> and she left with an enormous sorrow over the fact that she had no martyr relative to visit and to read *fātiḥa* for in there. That same night, she wrote on her Facebook page with a lot of anguish: “We are the strangers who do not have loved ones in the meadow of the martyrs (*naḥnū al-ḡurabā' 'allaḍīn lā 'aḥibbata lanā fī raḍāt as-shuhadā'*). And one day, she saw the picture of a martyr who looked just like her brother. So she wrote a short fiction about her family after Mohammad's martyrdom and she showed it to him. He laughed.



*Figure 7: Rawḍat As-shahīdeen, one of the official graveyards of the Hezbollah's martyrs in Al-Dahiya. Photo credit: Aline Androun*

This sentiment of wishing to be related to a martyr could be uncharitably interpreted as a pursuit of social capital in the community through holding a specific discourse, through which my interlocutors and women in the community would be trying to assert their distinctiveness and perform their belonging to a certain

<sup>75</sup> One of the official graveyards of the Hezbollah's martyrs in Al-Dahiya.

sociocultural-religious-political identity (the one Hezbollah offers). While not entirely dismissing this interpretation out of hand, I would like to propose an alternative reading however that draws upon ideas shared by my interlocutors and that express some quite distinct concerns.

As I understood, most of my interlocutors think of the newly acquired status (of being related to the martyr) differently. First, they conceptualized the martyrdom of their relative as a trial (*'ibtīlā'*) that offers both a challenge and an opportunity to subject oneself to *jihād-al-nafs* and thus reach self-actualization (*al-takāmul al-nafsī*) (which I will discuss in Zahraa's story). Second, they also understand it as a specific responsibility toward the community which I shall only briefly mention here and discuss at more length in another chapter.

### **A brother as a refuge**

Mohammad was to Zahraa a "*refuge malja'*". When they were kids, they lived together in *al-'Abbasiyyeh*, a beautiful Southern village at the outskirts of Tyre. They shared the same bedroom and would never get to sleep before endless discussions about their every day's exciting adventures — a tree they finally successfully climbed, or the number of mantis they managed to chase and collect that day.

The university studies brought the siblings even closer to one another. Mohammad had to move to Beirut one year before Zahraa to study at an elite international university in the Hamra neighborhood. She remembers how excited he was when he rented an apartment in the big city with some of his best friends. But he eventually gave it up in order to live with her when, a year later, she decided to join him in Beirut to pursue a degree in Media studies at another University.

“That’s why he was my refuge. He never left me alone. He was always extremely caring and considerate, never leaving my side. He accompanied me in the biggest milestones in my life: my university, my work and my daily struggles.”

For Zahraa, a rural young girl who had never gotten the chance before to rely solely on herself, Beirut was almost impossible to navigate without Mohammad.

“I was scared at first but Mohammad was always there for me. When I try to recall our memories together, this is the period that I remember most vividly. It was not until we lived together that I learnt how much my brother is whole heartedly self-sacrificing. He would rarely go out to have fun with his close friends in order to avoid leaving me alone. My university is in Unesco. He would drive every single day from Dahiya to my university no matter how bad the traffic was, and spend hours on the road just so that I do not go back home alone.<sup>76</sup>”

When he got married, Zahraa felt slightly jealous because she feared that his new life might take him from her. But, she immediately realized that it was not the case.

---

<sup>76</sup> Note that in the community, the authoritative position and the guardianship of a father over his unmarried daughter might be sometimes passed on to or even shared with the eldest son and of his married daughter to her husband. Consider for example how one of my interlocutors whose brother is a martyr told me that although her mother would not ask her to prepare food for her father, she would insist on her to do it for her brother and to ask for his permission before going out after 8 at night.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that women in the community like Zahraa extensively depend on their brothers or generally their male relatives (like Sarah for example his martyrdom orphaned me). There are both theological and sociological bases for such a dependency. The reasoning behind it is twofold. Firstly, there is the general that belief that Quran makes the men guardians over women . Secondly, many activities in the public sphere (like commutation, walking in public spaces especially at night, visiting or sleeping over a friend’s house etc...) are considered to provoke worrisome if navigated by women alone since their bodies are thought of as naturally arousing sexual desires in men who could potentially hurt them. Most of the women in the community, including my interlocutors, do not challenge (and often share) these prominent views that limit their participation in their public sphere.

But while Zahraa’s brother attitude might originally stem from such understanding of gender construction, it transformed into an expression of care that it is highly appreciated even requested by Zahraa herself.

“He astonishingly knew how to balance it all: his wife, his parents, his sister, his job with her dad in clothing commerce and his volunteering at *al-ta‘bi‘a al-tarbawiyya*”.

Mohammad was not in fact a fighter. He was only a part time volunteer with Hezbollah, mainly organizing cultural activities to promote Hezbollah’s mission within universities. At his own university, the calm yet charismatic young man’s role was to ensure that potentially interested young men and women become officially affiliated with Hezbollah. After a remarkable success in drawing the attention of the younger generation to Hezbollah with his delightful attitude, the party offered Mohammad a monthly salary to recompense his efforts but he refused. On that Zahraa commented:

“He thought of it not as a job but as a good deed (*ṣdaqā*) and a pious act towards Allah almighty (*qurbatan ‘ila allāhi ta‘āla*)”.

What characterizes Zahraa’s memories and descriptions of her brother is that they fit the exact imaginary of the “martyr of the rosary”; a category of which Fatima made clear that it did not apply to her own brother Mohammad. Unlike Fatima, Zahraa is in awe of her brother’s personality that allowed him to actively *become* a martyr by putting Allah first as she told me.

“A martyr is a chosen man *rajul mukhtār*, who has put Allah in front of him all along the way.”

A quick observation of the women related to the Hezbollah’s martyrs might lead to conclude that they are strictly and somehow exclusively invited to emulate the behavior of Sayyida Zaynabe in Karbala. Such emulation revolves mainly about the role that she played on the battlefield and later in Kufa and in the court of Yazid, where she patiently bore witnesses to the death of Imam Husayn, stood defiantly for, and became

the embodiment of, the righteousness of his cause. However, a closer look leads to a different conclusion: as we saw with Sarah, and we're about to see with Zahraa, my interlocutors actively seek to emulate the martyr's role as well.

However, since there is a dominant assumption in the community that God chooses his martyrs, my interlocutors find themselves urged to compare their own daily conduct to that of the martyr to assess their degree of proximity or farness from the righteous path of *Jihād*. Thus, Zahraa says: "I envy my brother".

Furthermore, insofar as the typical understanding of Ashura posits a putative separation between men's self-actualization and that of women, an analysis that solely focuses on agency (who gets to go to war) runs the risk of reinscribing this ideological separation without putting it into critical scrutiny. The way her brother's martyrdom shifts her perspective on how she should lead her life, unsettles some assumptions of the liberal imaginary on Muslim women's agency even when those women do not aim at transforming or challenging the highly patriarchal ways in which their agency is limited in the society.

### ***I envy my brother***

Two main characteristics of the martyr Mohammad seem to stand out for Zahraa and, as we will see later, shape the way in which she remembers him and therefore experiences her grief. The first one is his "self – abnegation (*nukrān aq-dāt*)" and the second one is his "renunciation of *al-dunyā* ('*uzūf 'an al-dunyā*)".

"He was extremely self- denying (*mutanakkir li-dātihī*), so wholeheartedly devoted (*mokhlīṣ*) to God and to his righteous path (*tarīkihi al-mustaqīm*). I never saw someone calmer, tenderer and more sincere than him. He had it all: a more or less

privileged family. He got married when he was twenty three. He loved his wife. And, when God gave him a daughter, he adored her. His job with my dad in the clothing trade business was very successful. He did his bachelor at XXX, and then his masters at XXX, two prestigious universities and then he got a scholarship in Europe to pursue his PhD. Yet, he turned his back on all of it, on *al-dunyā* and he chose *al-'ākhira*. All those temptations (*muğrayāt*) failed to preclude him from marching in the path of *Jihād*. He knew how to keep everything balanced. There was not a single day where he forgot to call my parents or to check on them. He was dutiful and obedient (*bārr*) to them like no one else. He did not let the preoccupations of *al-dunyā* distract him (*tulhīh*) from seeking (*as-sa'ī*) the content (*ar-riḍā*) of Allah.”

Following from her act of bearing witness to the way God blessed her brother with martyrdom, Zahraa expressed to me that she can hardly stop herself from comparing it to her own failure in sustaining a similar attention in her daily life to matters of *al-'ākhira*, especially after giving birth to her daughter Fatima.

“When my brother became a martyr, I started comparing his devoutness (*tafānī*) in his worship to Allah to mine. His piety is hardly emulated (*yaş'ub taqliduhā*). How he fasted Rajab and Shaaban<sup>77</sup> or prayed one hundred kneeling (*rak'a*)<sup>78</sup> each night. His tongue was continuously repeating *tasbīhāt*<sup>79</sup> and *ṣalawāt*. When I recall these images of how pious he was, I envy him (*'ağbuṭuhu*) and I realize the extent of my remissness towards Allah. I cannot even reach one fourth of his level of piety. It

---

<sup>77</sup> Rajab and Shaaban are two sacred months in Islam preceding Ramadan.

<sup>78</sup> Kneeling is considered to be a fundamental prayer move in Islam.

<sup>79</sup> *tasbīhāt* and *ṣalawāt* are a form of dhikr that involves the repetitive utterances of short sentences in the praise of Allah and the prophet respectively.

demands a great effort and a great amount of time. No, not a lot of time actually, but a wise division of priorities (*taqsīm ḥakīm lil- 'awlawiyyāt*). Mohammad did not have the time but Allah was his priority. Allah is my priority as well but my family takes all of my time. After I got married, I could not be like him. My natural role as a woman inside and outside the house stole all my focus (*tarkīzī*). Like Mohammad, Allah is my priority. But when I breastfeed, or do the chores around the house, or buy the vegetables or cook, I get distracted (*biltihī*). Sometimes when I hold Fatima in my arms to breastfeed her I wonder whether I am using it as an excuse not to be a proper worshipper.

[...]

There is always a voice inside of me reminding me of my delinquency (*taqṣīrī*) when compared to Mohammad. And even when I try to defend myself by thinking that being a new mother, a housewife and a radio broadcaster is challenging, I remember how Mohammad was. He had the same responsibilities as me, if not more. He would wake up at night to feed his newborn daughter. He would change her diapers. He would give her a car ride to fall asleep when she would be sick. His wife constantly speaks about his devotion to his marriage and his family. He would do all of it and he was the best of us [the siblings] in (*ṣilat al- 'arḥām*) and in (*birr al-wālidayn*). I would be sometimes cooking in one hand and holding Fatima in the other and my mother would call me on Whats App and I fail to answer her, not because I do not want to but because I would be genuinely incapable of doing so. This is when I bluntly see my failure to do what ought to be done, and how far I am from the martyr (*qaddeh b 'īdeh 'annū*). There is not a single excuse that could be given to defend my slackness...not a single one. I am even failing to do my slightest duties towards the martyr as his sister. Sometimes *al-*



*dunyā stands* between me and remembering him. Every day, right after I wake up or last thing before I go to bed, I remember him. But during the day, I sometimes forget. I would get distracted while preparing a grocery list or thinking about new ideas for my radio program. And this kills me on the inside. It burns me. He gave his life to me and to this country and yet I cannot remember him as I should. Shame on me! (‘*ayb ‘alayyī*’).

The challenge that Zahraa regards as central to her act of witnessing to the martyr and bearing his legacy does not have to do with her performing the regular mandatory religious duties (such as praying five times per day, fasting and reading the Qur’an) as she performs those duties regularly. Despite this fact, what she is concerned with instead, is how to render all-aspects of her life- of which worship is simply one, albeit an important part- into means of self-actualization that are directed toward *al-‘ākhirā* just like her brother did. She expressed how distressed she feels upon having to deal with all the worldly affairs on a daily basis which interferes with the attention she would rather give to the otherworldly matters (of which remembering the martyr is an essential part). Her statement: “Sometimes *al-dunyā stands* between me and remembering him” conveys this sentiment strongly.

And although she recognizes her inability to become a literal martyr herself, due to her being a woman, it does not absolve her from a relentless criticizing of her own performance in her seemingly inability to preserve a sustained quotidian attention to her worldly and otherworldly matters and thus to somewhat *performing* martyrdom in her every day. But since her way of organizing her daily affairs according to her gives little indication of her religious commitments and her commitment to the martyr, Zahraa wants to ameliorate the situation through the cultivation of those bodily aptitudes,

virtues, habits and desires that serve to ground martyrdom within the grounds of everyday living.

Like my other interlocutors, shortly after her brother's martyrdom, Zahraa acknowledged that there are many aspects of her daily life, as a bereaved woman related to the martyr that are not directly ruled by dictates of the sacred text or with a clear biography of Sayyida Zaynabe, and that the everyday demands a lot of focus on a tiring amount of responsibilities (work, housework, being a wife and a mother) whose practice comes at odds with the role of a sister of a martyr as a bearer of his legacy.

This unsettling acknowledgment with all the resulting discomfort that burdened Zahraa, made her actively reformulate her perspective on what counts and does not count as an otherworldly matter.

### ***Al- duniyā- duniyā and al-duniyā- 'ākhira***

“I had to seek answers for myself. I had to learn the ways in which I could focus on *al- 'ākhira* with all these *duniyā* responsibilities standing in my way. I came up with two concepts (*'ikhtara 'et muṣṭalaḥayn*): *al- duniyā- duniyā* and *al-duniyā- 'ākhira*. The difference between the two is that *duniyā - duniyā* is what is done for this life without a deep consideration about its influence on *al- 'ākhira* whereas in *al-duniyā- 'ākhira*, one has *al- 'ākhira* constantly in mind and has a focused intention on it (*niyya murakkiza*). All revolves about the intentness (*al-niyya*) of what we do. Mohammad had a pure intention (*niyya khāliṣa*) to Allah almighty. Even when he pursued what one might think of as *duniyā* matter like taking care of his daughter or loving his wife or studying, he directed his intention towards Allah and *al- ' ākhira* ”.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Sarah echoed a same belief although she came to this conclusion differently: “Now I understand that *al-duniyā* and *al- 'ākhira* are not in conflict. It is in this *al-duniyā* that I seek for (*al- ' ākhira bis'ā lal- 'ākhira*).

Coming up with these two concepts, shows how, although restricted with the limits of her own gender's constructions, Zahraa sought to find a way to resolve the tension that she was experiencing between worldliness and otherworldliness in order to become a martyr herself.

And while investigating the role she assigns herself, inspired by the tradition and the gender constructions of the community, Zahraa acknowledges yet another responsibility that falls on her as the bearer of the legacy of the martyr. Not only has she to embody the righteousness of his cause herself for her own self-actualization, but she has to also represent a "model" as the sister of the martyr to the whole community. Zahraa recognizes how challenging it can be to be a "living embodiment (*tajsīd ḥayy*) of the values he represented".

"Now I am the sister of the martyr and I should be up to the challenge. I should now embrace the fact that I must present a model (*qaddim namūḍaj*). I cannot be the sister of the martyr and not pray or fast for example. This would be such a disgrace! I must be a living embodiment (*tajsīd ḥayy*) of the values he represented."

The next chapter deals with the tension between the collectivization *vs.* the irreducible privacy of one's grief that stems from such understanding of a woman's role as cherishing her continuous relation with the martyr to whom she's related.

---

and work for it. Islam also obliges us to take care of ourselves ('anafusnā) and of the daily matters (al-shu' ūn al-dunyawiyya)".

## CHAPTER III

### THE TENSION BETWEEN THE COLLECTIVATIZATION AND THE IRREDUCIBLE PRIVACY OF ONE'S GRIEF

Asmaa: “You know, I have a very special relation with *Ahl Al-Bayt* especially Sayyida Zaynabe. I imagine her in Ashura losing her brothers and her sons and I cry because she stayed strong even after all her sorrows. I say to myself that if she could endure her pain I must endure mine, because I am trying to console her and be like her”.

Rayane: “What does it mean to console Sayyida Zaynabe?”

A: “It means that I will give up my grief on someone I love because he was with Hezbollah protecting her and because her loss is much bigger than mine but she endured it anyway”.

[...]

R: “So you think you will never love anyone again?”

A: “What I know is that I will only accept the hand of a fighter (*mujāhid*), because they have the kindest hearts. But still, no matter how much I will love him, it won't compete with my love for Salim. My future husband should know that”.

Asmaa's statements above could shed light on the third tension between the collectivization and the irreducible privacy of one's grief that this chapter will deal with. Upon relying on the resource of emulating *Ahl Al-Bayt* in order to give form and direction to her work of grief, Asmaa is consenting to align her grief with the shared discourses and interpretations of a collective story (*I have a very special relation with Ahl-Al-Bayt especially Sayyida Zaynabe [...] I say that if she could endure her pain I must endure mine, because I am trying to console her and be like her*) which stands in

sharp tension with the irreducible privacy of her own grief and the unsubstitutability of the one being lost (*But still, no matter how much I will love him, it won't compete with my love for Salim*).

How do the historical narrative of Ashura and the historical figure of Sayyida Zaynabe *inspire* the women related to the martyrs to be in the world, and what does “inspire” mean in such cases? Is experiencing the grief of martyrdom a way for these women to enter into a phase of *emulation* with *Ahl-Al-Bayt* by readopting the narrative of Ashura, the climax of *Ahl-Al-Bayt's* history, the link between three generations of Imams, and thus to get the closest to being like *Ahl-Al-Bayt*? How does relying on such narrative resources to interpret and work on one's grief shape their experience of it? What is the divine forbearance (*taṣabbur*) that they get in return for this collectivization of their grief narrative? How is this concept different from that of patience (*ṣabr*)? How is their pain rendered collective through this discourse and process of *emulation* and *consolation*? Is surviving the grief mainly a creative act performed by an autonomous individual subject or is it more akin to a tuning-in to a collective interpretation? What does it mean to give one's grief to one's community? What about her voice, the uniqueness of her being in front of the submersion in the collective? To which extent my interlocutors get to shape how their grief becomes externalized? For example, what do they choose to share about the uniqueness of a particular martyr in public, and what do they keep private? By externalizing their grief, do they feel more central to the experience of martyrdom or on the periphery of it? What are the obligations of offering solace and support that these women feel they have toward their family and the women related to the martyrs in the community?

In what follows, I intend to bring into analysis this third tension between the collectivization and the irreducible privacy of one's grief. In order to do so, I will try to analyze the concepts of inspiration (*'istilhām*)<sup>81</sup>, emulation (*tamaṭṭul*), divine forbearance (*taṣabbur*) and consolation (*muwāsāt*) that my interlocutors use to make sense of their experience.

### **Inspiration (*'istilhām*)**

As I already pointed out many times so far and especially in the introduction, my interlocutors avail themselves of the narrative of Ashura to interpret the martyrdom of their loved ones in the Hezbollah intervention in Syria. In conversation I had with them, they used the word “inspiration” (*'istilhām*) to refer to their way of linking the two events. My interlocutor Zaynabe for example told me: “We are inspired by the values of Ashura in our support for the path of Hezbollah” (*niḥnā nastalhim min qiyam 'āshūrā' bī da 'emnā la nahj ḥezbollā*).

I will use a vignette from my interview with Em Mahmoud to further illustrate how most of my interlocutors (and women from the community) draw from Ashura as a source of inspiration (*'istilhām*) in the complex process of making sense of their grief.

*Em Mahmoud lost her youngest son Husain in the Syrian Holy Defense battles (ma'ārik al-difā' al-muqaddas) in 2013. Two of her sons were Hezbollah fighters, on the same battlefield. “But Allah chose Husain out of the two”, she told me casually as she was asking her daughter to bring me some chocolate. She was a fifty-three years-old woman who held a bureaucratic position in the Women's Associations of Hezbollah,*

---

<sup>81</sup> Etymologically in Arabic (*'istilhām*) is based on the verb form (*'istif'ala*) that implies actively seeking and asking, a meaning which the English translation “inspiration” does not clearly convey.

where she had a wide network of connections with the women related to the Hezbollah martyrs of different generations; and she was hoping that Allah would also graciously allow her to become one of them.

*“He died defending Sayyida Zaynabe, from the same bastards who were fighting Imam Husain in Karbala. My son’s name is Husain, and he was truly a Husain, defending Zainab”.*

*Em Mahmoud availed herself, like many in her community, of the resources of the Ashura ritual, to interpret the martyrdom of her son in the battles waged by Hezbollah next to the Syrian Arab Army against ISIS forces “who were planning on attacking the shrine of Sayyida Zaynabe in Damacus and destroying it” according to her. “My son safeguarded our honor as women (‘aridnā) from (banī ʿumayya)<sup>82</sup> who wanted to breach our sanctity (ʿintihāk ḥurmatinā)<sup>83</sup>. Without Hezbollah, only Allah could know what would have happened to us!”*

*I was about to leave when she called her eldest daughter Israa asking her to bring the “DVD”<sup>84</sup>. After disappearing for a few minutes, at the end of the hallway that faces the main door, Israa came back and handed me a DVD.*

---

<sup>82</sup> The descendants of the Umayyad Caliphate.

<sup>83</sup> What Em Mahmoud is referring to here is a sentiment that is widely shared in the community. Since the shrine of Sayyida Zaynabe became an extension of her own historical figure, the ISIS attacks on it were seen as directed toward Sayyida Zaynabe herself to breach her sanctity as a dead and as a woman. At the same time, some of ISIS fighters were threatening on social media to take the “Hezbollah women as hostages” to perform sexual jihad (*Jihād al-nikāḥ*) and thus Sayyida Zaynabe came to represent all the other women in the social imaginary in the community. If the Hezbollah fighters lost their fights, not only would the honor of Sayyida Zaynabe be defiled, but also that of all the other women in the community.

<sup>84</sup> Many families choose to commemorate their martyr by producing DVDs that share parts of their will, some photos and videos of them on the battlefield (given to them by Hezbollah officially), scenes from their commemoration and interviews with their families and friends. The realization of this DVDs is a great example of how the grief gets collectivized and shared in the community.

*On the cover is a photograph of the martyr in his battledress and a black hat. The dome of Sayyida Zaynabe was photo-shopped behind him, surrounded by a significant yellow circle and some dispersed clouds. When I asked Husain's sister Israa about the cover, she told me that she and her sister chose it, and their friend who works as a graphic designer applied the design template. "The yellow circle is the sun," she answered laughing. "It personifies the righteousness of Hezbollah's cause as God says in the Qur'an 'And the earth will shine with the light of its lord.'" "But it also means that whoever goes to defend Sayyida Zaynabe's shrine and dies protecting her honor must also be divine, blessed by Ahl- Al Bayt," replied Fatima, Husain's second sister.*

*A part of his will was written into the picture, "And [Oh Allah] bless me with an honored martyrdom," in his handwriting. And next to it was his full name signature "H. K. l M." The signature invites the observer to understand that the man wants to tell us: "This was fully intentional; I take complete pride in it."*

*Excerpts from the martyr's will figure in the background, in his handwriting.*

*Here we are today fighting under the banner of our Imam, in defense of our Sayyida ....I hope that Allah almighty would make us from those who maintain the trust...I confide in you Ah! .....oh my intercession... and oh the moon of Bani Hashem .... From your men those who secure... [Unreadable].*

According to Em Mahmoud and her daughters, the historical narrative of Ashura deeply inspires their understanding of the Hezbollah intervention in Syria and the loss of Husain. Their sentiment, which is widely shared in the community, was to a great extent shaped by the official discourse of Hezbollah and especially by its leader Sayyid Hassan Nassrallah who, on many events, highlighted the similarities between the



battle of Karbla and that of the Holy Defense (*al-difā' al-muqaddas*). And while we heard many skeptic voices from the community at the early beginning of Hezbollah's intervention (2012) in al-Qusayr, condemning it, once the battles moved to the vicinity of Sayyida Zaynabe mosque in Damascus (2013) and after the consecutive ISIS attacks in Lebanon (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016), the majority of the community got to eventually appreciate the Hezbollah move. This is when we started hearing women related to the martyrs using the discourse of "inspiration from Ashura" widely.

During my fieldwork, I was able to identify four main elements that encouraged such analogy or "inspiration" to take place:

First of all, the war in Syria was different from the two wars that Hezbollah fought against Israel in the late 90s-2000 and later in 2006. This time, their enemy (ISIS) was claiming to be Muslim just like them, which is similar to what happened in Karbala (a group of Muslims against another)<sup>85</sup>. Secondly, although ISIS fighters used modern weaponry, they also resorted to ancient ones (like swords, fire and knives). One of their mottos was "we came for you to slaughter you" (*bil-dabhi ji'nākom*) and they had a caliphate (just like Yazid in Ashra was claiming to be the caliphate of the Muslims). These three elements sustained associations with the army of Yazid that slaughtered Imam Husain and up to seventy of his disciples (including members of his own family). Thirdly, Sayyid Hasssan Nassrallah (being a Sayyid) and literally descendant of the prophet and of Imam Husain also came to extend from the historical figure of Imam Husain<sup>86</sup>. Fourthly, there is what Em Mahmoud is referring to when she

---

<sup>85</sup> It is also important to remark that Hezbollah as a Shia group (disciples of Ahl- Al Bay) felt that they belong to the camp (*mu'askar*) of Imam Husayn.

<sup>86</sup> It is important for me to note here that my interlocutors said "Sayyid Hassan Nassrallah is like Husain" but I did not hear them merge the two in one.

says: ““My son safeguarded our honor as women (‘*aridnā*) from (*banī ‘umayya*)<sup>87</sup> who wanted to breach our sanctity (*‘intihāk ḥurmatinā*)<sup>88</sup>. “Without Hezbollah, only Allah could know what would have happened to us!” is a sentiment that is widely shared in the community. Since the shrine of Sayyida Zainab became an extension of her own historical figure, the ISIS attacks on it were seen as directed toward Sayyida Zaynab herself to breach her sanctity as a dead person and as a woman. At the same time, some ISIS fighters were threatening on social media to take the “Hezbollah women as hostages” to perform sexual jihad (*Jihād al-nikāḥ*) and thus Sayyida Zainab came to represent all the other women in the social imaginary in the community. If the Hezbollah fighters lost their fights, not only would the honor of Sayyida Zainab be defiled, but also that of all the other women in the community.



*Figure 8: From the commemoration of Ashura in Al-Dahiya (September 2019, Photo Credit: Aline Androun)*

<sup>87</sup> The descendants of the Umayyad Caliphate.

<sup>88</sup>In Ashura, a famous call that Imam-al-Husayn made was “who can defend the women of the messenger of Allah?” (*‘amman yazubbu ‘an ḥurami rasūli ‘allāh?*).

In order to show how this inspiration from the Ashura narrative takes shape and then affects the way in which some of the women related to the martyrs might experience their grief, I will share some additional material from my interview with my interlocutor Sarah<sup>89</sup>, a message that she wrote upon the martyrdom of her husband Husayn:

“In the name of Allah the Merciful,

Praise is to Allah, who looked at my family compassionately, and chose a martyr from them.

I never got as close to knowing Hussein and ‘*āshūrā*’<sup>90</sup> during this year and in *al-‘āṣir*<sup>91</sup>. How far away we were from apprehending them... As for Hussein, he was capable of grasping their teachings in his short lived life, which gave him faith that the real victory cannot be attained in this ephemeral world (*dunyā faniyā*)<sup>92</sup> and that the only way towards self-realization (*al-sumuw al-naṣī*) lies in crossing this world to that world...

To the man who adored *Imam Husayn* and left the world asking to be in his vicinity ... His fairness and his departure orphaned me (*yattamatnī*) ... but I would not have known some of (‘*āshūrā*’) if it weren’t for this orphanhood.

---

<sup>89</sup> Already featured in the third section of the second chapter.

<sup>90</sup> ‘*āshūrā*’ in the community refers to the whole week preceding the massacre including the day on which it took place.

<sup>91</sup> *Al-‘āṣir*, literally meaning the tenth is the day (the 10<sup>th</sup> of Muharram) on which the Karbala massacre took place.

<sup>92</sup> The concept of the ephemerality of *al-dunyā* (*al-dunyā faniyā*) is very central to how my interlocutors think of their life on Earth. It is rarely a destination and is often a mere passage to *al-‘ākhira*.

I do not intend to hide that my yearning has broken my heart... But I am feeling a glory (*'izza*) and a dignity (*karāma*) that I wouldn't have even attained if it weren't for this blessing (*Baraka*)...

In these days, I feel ashamed of my sacrifice *'akhjal min taḍḥiyatī* in front of the loyalty of Muslim<sup>93</sup>, the bravery of Habib and Zohair, the almost crazy dedication of Abess, the courage of Al-Akbar and Kassem, the altruism of Abbass, the heartburn of Al-Rabab and of Ramla, the loneliness of Imam Hussein and his call "Is there any supporter to support me? (*Hal min nāširen yanṣurunī?*)"<sup>94</sup>, and the patience of Sayyida Zaynabe<sup>95</sup>.

*Mawlātī O Zaynabe* teach me the meaning of (*al-ṣabr*) ... Give me some of your strength; ignite me with your eyes' light that saw nothing but beauty (*mā ra'at 'illā jamīlā*)<sup>96</sup> in the martyrdom of her brother.

---

<sup>93</sup> The names mentioned in the following sentences are companions or relatives of Imam Husayn who played a role in Ashura.

<sup>94</sup> This is the famous call that Al-Imam Al-Husain made on the battlefield when all the other men (including from his family and disciples) were killed at the hands of Al-Yazid. After desperately shouting for a supporter and not getting answered, Husain was brutally killed and beheaded and his camp of the women and children were burnt and every survivor was taken as a hostage. Each year in al-Dahiya the rituals of '*āshūrā*', on the *āsir*, after the sheikh (usually Sheikh Ali Barakat) reads the story of Al-Imam Husayn called *al-maṣra' al-husseynī*, he repeats the call of Imam al-Husayn "*Is there any supporter to support me? Hal min nāširen yanṣurunī?*" and then everyone in the audience shouts crying "Here we are O Husayn! *labbayka yā husayn!*"

<sup>95</sup> In the community, Sayyida Zaynabe is known as the embodiment of patience *tajsid al-ṣabr*.

<sup>96</sup> This very famous saying is taken from Sayyida Zaynabe's speech to Ubayd Allah Ibn Ziad (the governor of Basra, kufa and Khurasan during the reign of Muawiya and his son Yazid and is mostly known for being the the leading general of the Umayya army that fought Imam al-Husayn and his disciples). When the Sayyida Zaynabe was taken as a captive to the royal court of Yazid, Ibn Ziad provocatively asked her "How did you find the way Allah treated your brother and your family?"

Sayyida Zaynabe answered: "I saw nothing but beauty. ...It was Allah's wish that they should be martyred, and they met their deaths valiantly. If this was your heart's desire then you must indeed be content today. But you have killed those whom the Prophet (Allah's prayers be upon him and upon his holy Household) held upon his knee when they were children and whose play filled him with joy. Soon you will stand with them before Allah and they will demand justice. Beware the day of reckoning. O son of Marjanah! May your mother be mournful for you".

In the community, this quote "I saw nothing but beauty" is widely used during the rituals of '*āshūrā*'.

I feel bemused... What should I tell you about Husayn? He was my mentor and my inspiration, and everything beautiful in me was from him... Two years with him under one roof were lessons in *al-‘aqīda* and ethics (*al-akhlāq*) and struggle against oneself (*jihād al-nafs*)... He was my (*ḥawza*), I never needed to leave my house to study in it... Two years were sufficient for me to know that martyrdom does not suit but his likenesses (*lā talīqu ‘illā bi-’ amsālih*) ... Two years of sacrifice, knowledge seeking and wise time investment, were an example to be followed.

I am telling you about him so that you know that his martyrdom did not happen by chance....

I am telling you so that you know that everyone who knew him, smelled in him the spirit (*rūḥ* of *wilāya*)<sup>97</sup> and true passion (*al-‘iṣq al-ḥaqīqī*)

I thank Allah that made me know him and that granted us, both him and I this great badge of honor (*wisām al-ṣaraf*)...

I make (*du ‘ā’*) to Allah so he would make me worthy of this glory just like Hussayn was, and that he would give me the strength to hold the title li (*‘aḥmila laqab*) of a wife of a martyr...

I beg Allah to provide me with some of Zaynabe’s endurance and patience (*jalad wa ṣabr*) and her trust in Allah (*tawakkul*)

Alhamdulillah always and forever...

I saw nothing but beauty (*māra ‘aytu ‘illā jamīlā*)...

Sarah, the wife of the martyr Hussayn

This letter was the first thing that Sarah communicated to her family after the martyrdom of her husband Husayn. For three days, she lost her ability to talk. And now,

---

<sup>97</sup> The spirit *rūḥ* of *wilāya* is a reference to *wilāyat al-faqīh*.

when she tries to recall her memories of those days, all she can remember are the two following scenes: The first one is when she was sitting on the living room's couch. Her mother gave her a paper and a pencil and gently told her: "If you cannot talk, at least write. Habibti you shouldn't stay like this". So she wrote the letter. Out of fascination with it, her mother started typing it word-by-word on WhatsApp and then she sent it to the family group. One day later, the letter went viral on social media.

The second one was when she was shaking people's hands, those who came to give her condolences, and that she was obsessively whispering "O Zaynabe! Help me (*yā Zaynabe sā 'dīnī*)". I was supplying her (*'atawassaluhā*). I remember I was thinking to myself "How am I supposed to have patience now? I cannot endure it (*mā fīnī 'ithammal*)". I was so ashamed of myself towards Sayyida Zaynabe. I was not on the battlefield, no one took me as a hostage (*mā 'insabeht*). I did not lose my brother and the Imam of my time. I was thinking if I lost (*al-Sayyid Hassan*) or (*al-Sayyid al-kā'id*) who are like the imams of my time, it would be tremendously hard on me. So I asked Zaynabe to help me endure! I belong to a determinate path, to the path of Hezbollah and the way of *Karbalā'*. I felt that it would be hypocrite of me if I was supporter of Hezbollah as long as it did not affect to me. If I want to belong to them, then I should belong fully. My leader (Sayyid Hassan Nassrallah) gave his son as a sacrifice and Sayyida Zaynabe gave the Imam Husayn. My sacrifice compared to theirs is trivial (*taḍḥiyatī 'amām taḍḥiyatun sakhīfa*).

When I asked Sarah why she was referring to Ashura this much, she answered me: "Ashura is my inspiration (*'ilhāmī*). I seek inspiration from it (*bistalhim minhā*)". Yet, in the letter, she recognizes that it is the martyrdom of Husayn that brought her closer to grasping the teachings of Ashura: "I never got as close to knowing Hussein

and (*'āshūrā'*) during this year and in (*al- 'āṣir*). How far away we were from apprehending them". Thus the concept of inspiration is nonlinear: although the women get inspired by the narrative of Ashura, the martyrdom of their men inspires them to think differently about these stories as well.

Thus in seeking to be inspired, the women related to the martyrs are choosing to align their grief with a larger narrative which gives them the ability to belong to something more expansive, and offers them a complex meaning making through which they can interpret an extremely painful event such as the brutal death of someone dear.

Although the pain might not have totally faded away (*"I do not intend to hide that my yearning has broken my heart"*), Sarah's espousal of this larger narrative (as it shows from the detailed account of the historical narratives of *karbala* in the letter for example) definitely plays an important role in soothing her grief by giving her not only purpose but feelings of glory *'izza* and dignity *karāma* (I am feeling a glory *'izza* and a dignity *karāma* that I wouldn't have even attained if it weren't for this blessing *Baraka*).

But, even though Sarah was assertive about the interpretation she is choosing to make of the death of someone as dear as Husayn, this mode of interpretation did not seem to give her enough solace. In the second scene she remembers, where she is supplying Sayyida Zaynabe to help her, we can sense the extent to which she is suffering. Thus, Sarah chooses to take yet another step to interpret her grief. Instead of just supplying Sayyida Zaynabe, she goes to meet her in Karbala.

### **Emulation (*'iẖtidā'*) and divine forbearance (*taṣabbur*)**

What does it really mean for the women related to the Hezbollah martyrs to emulate (*'iẖtidā'*) the model of Sayyida Zaynabe? What is divine forbearance

(*taṣabbur*)? How is it connected to the act of emulation? And, how does it manifest itself in their lives?

In order to answer these questions, let me bring up another passage from my interview with Sarah where she speaks about a “life-changing” experience she had while performing the pilgrimage walking from Najaf to Karbala in Iraq.

Few stories capture the relationship that my interlocutors establish with Sayyida Zaynabe as well Sarah’s story does. After asking in whispering for Sayyida Zaynabe to help her, “O zaynabe! Help me (*yā Zaynabe sā ‘dīnī*)”, Sarah sought Sayyida Zaynabe’s help by physically walking where she walked. And then, “something weird happened (*ṣār shī ḡarīb*)” as she told me. This pilgrimage was “very very very influential” and “changed her life” afterwards. Husayn’s commemoration coincided with the day of (*‘āshura*). On the Arbaeen of Imam Husayn (*‘arba ‘īn al- ‘imām al- ḥusayn*)<sup>98</sup>, Sarah went with her family to the Visit of the Arbaeen (*ziyārat al- ‘arba ‘īn*) in Najaf. “It was such a pivotal (*mifṣaliyy*) event in my life. We walked for three days. I walked where the Sayyida Zaynabe walked and was going to Imam al-Husayn. I started talking to her confidentially (*nājaythā*). I told her: ‘O zaynabe! I only gave too little compared to your sacrifice. I want to be patient like you (*ṣabūra*), I want to go back (*baddī ‘irja ‘*) to (*al-dunyā*). I need you to help me find my commandment (*taklīf*). Help me recalibrate (*raklij*)<sup>99</sup> my life. When I walked where she (Sayyida Zaynabe) walked, I suddenly got a response (*lāqīt jawāb*). I felt stronger. I figured that if I wept (*bkīt bi-*

---

<sup>98</sup> This is a religious observance (visiting of Imam Husayn’s shrine and walking from Najaf to Karbala) that occurs forty days after the Day of Ashura. It commemorates the martyrdom of Husayn.

<sup>99</sup> From the French word “réglage”.



'*uwwi*) and grieved, it is not contradictory with the path (*mush munāfi lil-masīra*), because Sayyida Zaynabe also grieved and cried.”

Etymologically, in Arabic, the word emulation (*'ih̥tidā'*) is derived from the verb (*haḍā*<sup>100</sup>) which literally translates as “to walk”. (*'ih̥tidā'*) literally means: “to walk where someone else has walked”. By “walking where Sayyida Zaynabe walked”, while seeking to be like her “O zaynabe! [...] I want to be patient like you (*ṣabūra*)” Sarah performed both a literal and a metaphorical emulation that proved to be extremely influential on her. She found herself directed toward another understanding of her grief (especially regarding the first tension between contentment (*ar-riḍā*) and grief) “*When I walked where she (Sayyida Zaynabe) walked, I suddenly got a response (lāqīt jawāb). I felt stronger. I figured that if I wept (bkīt bi-'uwwi) and grieved, it is not contradictory with the path (mush munāfi lil-masīra), because Sayyida Zaynabe also grieved and cried*”.

When she says “I suddenly got a response (*lāqīt jawāb*)”, Sarah is acknowledging that although this thought might have emerged from her own mind in an act of self-reflection, it was directly stimulated by her emulation of Sayyida Zaynabe, who answered her herself. Sarah told me: “Sayyida Zaynabe answered me when I asked her to give me patience (*ṣabr*), she gave me a divine forbearance (*taṣabbur*)”.

Sarah is echoing in this statement a conviction widespread and cultivated in the community that once the women related to the martyrs avail themselves of the historical narrative of Ashura to interpret their loss and align their grief with that of Sayyid Zaynabe by emulating her, they will get eventually rewarded with divine forbearance (*taṣabbur*).

---

<sup>100</sup> From the same verb root derives the noun (*hiḍā'*) literally meaning shoes.

In the following section, I would like to zero in on one of the most interesting concepts that I encountered during my research: “*taṣabbur*” or divine forbearance.

(*taṣabbur*) has a double relation to the concept of emulation: it is both directly inspired by the emulation of Sayyida Zaynabe as a historical model and is a direct outcome of it.

Inspired by the Islamic tradition, the community understands any form of painful experience as a divine ordeal (*'ibtilā' rabbānī*): an inseparable part of the human experience and the natural order of life (*al-sunna al-ṭabī'iyya lil-ḥayāt*), and most importantly a divine doctrine (*sunna 'ilāhiyya*) through which God examines (*yamtaḥin*) humans and gives them an opportunity for self-actualization (*sumuww dātī*). This self-actualization is thought to be achieved through the exhibition of patience (*ṣabr*) which is believed to naturally accompany any misfortune. It is never rare to hear people in the community saying “God gives<sup>101</sup> patience (*ṣabr*) with each misfortune” (*'allāh byilhum as- ṣabr ma ' kul miḥna*).

Sayyida Zaynabe, often called “the mother of misfortunes” (*'um al-maṣā'ib*) as I already mentioned, is also known in the community as “the castle of patience” (*qal'at as-ṣabr*) due to the exceptional patience that she displayed even after the many misfortunes that she endured and bore witness to. When the women related to the martyrs try to emulate her and ask her to give them some of her patience (as Sarah did in the letter), she faithfully responds by mediating a divine forbearance (*taṣabbur*) to them from God<sup>102</sup>.

---

<sup>101</sup> In Arabic, my interlocutors use the word inspire in this context as well. “God inspires patience”

<sup>102</sup> The divine patience or forbearance (*taṣabbur*) is especially thought to be given by God, through the mediation of Sayyida Zaynabe, to the women who are related to the martyrs and, in the community I never heard it being attributed with any other kind of misfortunes.

Em Mahmoud<sup>103</sup> explained to me that God and Sayyida Zaynabe gave her heart patience to walk out of bereavement into a phase that she called (*taṣabbur*). When I asked her what is the difference between (*ṣabr* and *taṣabbur*), she answered that “(*ṣabr*) is merely a human act whilst (*taṣabbur*) is granted by Allah. It is a special capability to endure that only Allah could give to certain people”. “Without it”, she added, “I could have been dead by now from my sorrow”.

Sarah echoed Em Mahmoud’s understanding of (*taṣabbur*) as well:

“After I came back from that visit to Najaf, I felt that I was inspired (*’ulhimtu*) with divine forbearance (*taṣabbur*). There was a patience that did not extend from me (*mā ’imtaddit minnī*). There was a patience that I felt. I do not know how to explain it scientifically. There was a divine aid (*madad ’ilāhī*). I felt patience above and beyond this (*dunyā*) that we inhabit (*fawq wa ’ab’ad min hal dunyā ’illī ’āyshīnhā*)”.

When I questioned Sarah further about it, she explained to me:

“Allah says in a (*ḥadīth qudsī*) that He will be the heir of the martyr in his family (*khalīfatu as-shahīd fī ’ahlih*)<sup>104</sup>. So, He is promising us, and that’s a divine promise (*wa’ed ’ilāhī*), that when He takes a martyr, then he would be with us. A lot of women who went through this experience told me that this (*taṣabbur*) comes with the grief<sup>105</sup>. They told me that if I did not feel it right away, I should ask Sayyida Zaynabe to give it to me with the purest intention and she would.”

---

<sup>103</sup>Em Mahmoud lost her son on the battlefield fighting with Hezbollah, I will talk about her later in this chapter.

<sup>104</sup> Sarah uses google to tell me the exact formulation of the hadith.

<sup>105</sup> When I asked her if she knows any of these women personally she said that he heard of them but never met one.

And when I asked her about what she imagines could have happened were it not for this divine patience or (*taṣabbur*), she said to me:

“I would have isolated myself from (*al-dunyā*) (*kint 'in 'azalit 'an al-dunyā*). I would have locked myself in a room. It was extremely difficult for me “to focus on this return”<sup>106</sup> to (*al-dunyā*). But this (*taṣabbur*) that links me to the path (*masīra*) helped me come back”.

I cannot stress enough how valuable and significant this concept of (*taṣabbur*) was to my interlocutors, and is in general to women in the community. Similar to the visitational dream-visions of the martyrs, it contributed to a context of learning through which they are heard and aided once they align their grief with the collective narrative of Ashura. And, although I will not have enough space in this thesis to elaborate on the richness of this concept, I would like to only mention something important that Sarah shared with me because it is tightly connected to the last section of this chapter and the last chapter of the thesis itself.

Sarah said to me that although this (*taṣabbur*) is certainly granted to each woman related to the martyr, as she was told herself by the other women in the community, there is a significant responsibility that falls on the receiver of this divine gift: the responsibility to invest in it.

S: “We should invest (*lāzim nistaṭmir*) in this patience and make it grow (*nukabbiru*). A lot of women did not invest in it and they lost their way, they drowned, and they drifted away from the path (*ba 'adū 'an al-ṭarīq*)”.

R: “How do we invest in it?”

---

<sup>106</sup> Initially said in English.

S: “This (*taṣabbur*) is a gift that a woman related to the martyr receives from Allah, mediated (*bi-wāsiṭati*) by Sayyida Zaynabe. If my friend now gives me a gift, I have to gift her something back, right? This is common courtesy in our society. If Sayyida Zaynabe gave you (*taṣabbur*) then you should give her something back. You should console her (*tuwāsīhā*).”

In the coming section, I elaborate on this concept of “consolation” (*muwāsāt*) and in the fourth and last chapter of this thesis, I try to ethnographically document what happens when a woman related to a Hezbollah martyr “fails” to get inspired by the narrative of Ashura by aligning her grief with that of Sayyida Zaynabe and by emulating her, and thus gets deprived of receiving this “gift of (*taṣabbur*)”, as Sarah conceptualized it.

### **Consolation for Sayyida Zaynabe and for the other women**

When my interlocutors brought up the concept of consolation (*muāsāt*), a memory would often come to my mind from the commemoration of a martyr I attended thirteen years ago. The martyr was the brother of a friend, who died upon fighting in the Israeli War waged against Lebanon in July 2006. To commemorate the martyr, the family organized a gathering for a (*majlis ‘azā’*)<sup>107</sup> literally meaning a gathering of consolation.

When I walked through the main door and looked for my friend, I saw her sitting in the first row next to her mother and aunt. After I approached them and hugged them, I saw that there was an empty chair in the middle of that row, so I asked my

---

<sup>107</sup> It is a main ritual in Ashura (mostly done in Ashura but not exclusively) where a reciter narrates the

friend whether I could sit on it. She told me: “*Oh no, this is where Sayyida Zaynabe will sit. This majlis is to console her, once it starts, she will come to witness it, and so we left her a chair*”.

I am not aware of other occurrences of this kind in the community. But it concretely demonstrates, I think, the extent to which consolation is regarded a very important element to grief rituals.

Following from Sayyida Zaynabe’s ultimate sacrifice in Karbala, her bearing witness to the martyrdom of almost every men she knew for the sake of the righteous path of Islam, and her mediation of the gift of divine forbearance (*taṣabbur*) to the women related to the Hezbollah’s martyrs, the act of Consoling her (*muāsāt*) is thought of as a sort of gift reciprocation, as Sarah told me, which stems from a sense of duty that my interlocutors feel toward her.

For example, when Em Mahmoud received the news of the martyrdom of her son, those were the first sentiments she said she felt:

*“When I knew that I lost my son, I did not only think about my misfortune (muṣība). Instead, I directly thought to myself, O God so this is what Zaynabe must have felt. O God take my son if it means cooling off her heart a little bit”.*

From what I understood from my interlocutors, consoling Sayyida Zaynabe means putting oneself through what she went through (sharing in the sacrifice of one’s dear ones) and then emulating her patience while acknowledging that no matter how tremendously painful your pain is, hers is surely greater<sup>108</sup>.

---

<sup>108</sup> It goes without saying that although the women think of their sacrifice as a gift (an act of consolation) toward Sayyida Zaynabe, it also helps them give meaning to their painful loss and provides it with a purpose which allows them to navigate al-dunyā afterwards.

My interlocutor Zahraa told me: “Once a woman has a pure intention for consolation (*niyya khāliṣa lil-muwāsāt*), she will realize that Sayouyida Zaynabe’s loss was greater than hers and then her tears will not fall over who she lost but over the pain of Sayyida Zaynabe”.

In Ashura, in the community, one of the goals of the regular consolation gatherings is explicitly to console Ahl Al-Bayt. By commemorating the martyr through enacting the rituals of Ashura by way of the consolation gatherings, the women are prolonging the liminality of this ritual (hence the famous: Every land is Karbala, every day is Ashura (*kullu yawmen karbalā’*, *kullu yawmen ‘ashūrā’*). Through the act of crying, the women are uniting their pain with that of Sayyida Zaynabe, and since her pain is considered to be significantly greater, theirs becomes slightly “absorbed” during the act of consolation. This is what Em Mahmoud shared with me: “When I console Sayyida Zaynabe by giving her my grief over my son Husayn, she *absorbs (tamtayş)* my sadness”.



*Figure 9: A mother of two martyrs in the Ashura March in Al-Dahiya (September 2019, Photo Credit: Aline Androun).*

The women related to the martyrs do not feel this obligation of sharing their martyr with Sayyida Zaynabe only but also with other women in the community. Their consolation takes the shape, as we already discussed, of aligning their grief with the collective narrative of the community and thus giving up in one way or another the uniqueness of being of the martyr to share him with the community as their martyr as well, and as an equal martyr to all the others as well.

My interlocutor Zahraa feels a heart ease when someone asks her to speak about the martyr. It becomes an opportunity for her to “humbly return his gift” to her. When she speaks about him, she feels his presence even more:

“It the right *ḥaqqu* of the martyr on us to speak about him, to introduce him to the world, to talk about his virtues and his way of being that led him to such beautiful destination. The martyr’s life in its whole is a message to others, on how to truly be in this world. When my brother became a martyr, *he ceased being mine* [emphasis added]. *He ceased being our family’s belonging. He became everybody’s martyr.* The martyrdom demands you to let go of your loved one twice, first when you welcome their martyrdom and the path they have chosen, and then when you graciously accept that they do not belong to you anymore and that they became everybody’s. If you fail to do so, it only means that you’re selfish and that you do not truly love him.

In the same spirit, Zahraa gave me a book that narrates the biography of her brother, the martyr Mohammad. To her, it is the duty of the women related to the martyr to spread their word to the world and talk about their special traits:

“Mohammad’s *dunyā* life was immensely impactful on a lot of young men, but his martyrdom was awe inspiring. When we wrote a book about him, people came to us



and told us: ‘This man changed me, I pray on time.’ Or ‘I dress more modestly because of Mohammad. He became a role model to his generation.’”

My interlocutor Sarah shared the same sentiment as Zahraa:

“I feel satisfied (*bista ’nis*) when people find out about his beautiful traits, the traits that led him to such a beautiful ending. He is an example of how martyrdom chooses its men. Husayn is worth being (*’ahil*) a martyr and I thought that if I keep him to myself (*’ahṭafiz fi linafsī*), I would be selfish. When a man related to you becomes a martyr, he ceases to be yours only. He becomes a martyr for everyone. He becomes a role model (*namūḍaj*), an ideal (*quḍwa*). I loved martyrdom because of the stories that I heard about martyrs from other women and now I should tell these stories about Husayn to other women to make them appreciate martyrdom and know that they can survive it”.

But although this collectivization might have proved to be successful (in surviving pain- the feeling that someone belongs to something bigger than herself), it stands in tension with other aspects that the woman cherishes and remembers in private, because it would not fit with public parameters. For example, One young woman shared with me that her Hezbollah lover, who got killed in the *holy defense al-difā’ al-muqaddas*, used to kiss her secretly, even though they were not engaged yet. This story might be seen as conflicting with the public parameters of how a martyr must have been in *al-dunyā* to *deserve* his honorable death (e.g. A martyr must have been really pious but a man getting physically intimate with a woman to whom he is not religiously married yet is considered to be haram and against the general social norms of chastity).

Sometimes this tension between the collectivization of grief and its privacy is felt when a woman fears that her personal privacy might be breached. Or, when keeping some memories for herself feels more valuable than sharing them.

For example Sarah said to me: “Of course, there is a tension (*ṣirāʿ*) between the details that I should share to people and those which I choose not to. There are private stories that I keep just for me, I usually just speak in general about Husayn. There are a lot of beautiful things that I choose not to tell people about to keep them special, just for myself. There are also things that I choose to tell to certain people and not to everyone. It depends on who’s I am talking to”.

Em Mahmoud also shared with me some intimate details about how her son would ask her to comb his hair daily although he could do it for himself. And when I asked her why she considers this to be an un-sharable story publicly, she told me that: *“it is those memories that remind me that he was also my son, not just another martyr”*.

For Em Mahmoud, sharing this intimate detail about her relationship with her son risks to get him fully absorbed as a collective martyr and thus threatens his uniqueness of being for her “as her son” to be completely lost.

In the exegesis of this statement by Em Mahmoud, the tension between the martyr as collective being and the uniqueness of being comes well to the surface, but for her, although this tension was painful (“he is also my son”), it was apparently manageable. In other cases, it might become too much of a contradiction to bear. In the last chapter we will see what does it happen when a woman related to a martyr cannot avail herself of the Ashura narrative and the figure of Sayyida Zaynabe to make sense of her grief, because what most imposes itself to her is the loss of a son, brother or husband in his irreducible uniqueness. So, what does it happen when all the

interpretative moves we explored in this chapter fail to fulfill her aspiration to finding meaning in the death of her loved one? And, what are then the possible social costs for a woman who does not abide by the implicit and explicit prescriptions of inspiration, emulation and consolation?

The next chapter will try to answer these questions through the story of my interlocutor Safiyya.

## CHAPTER IV

### “MY HEART IS BLACK” CAN A GRIEVING VOICE ENDOW A CULTURE WITH A SOUL?

*“I went last week to the commemoration of my neighbor’s son. She (his mother) opened her door to the guests smiling. Can you believe it?! She was smiling all the time. I say this is not normal. It is either cold-heartedness or divine forbearance (taṣabbur). But it is absolutely impossible for this to be normal. I tasted grief. All my life has changed. I used to go out, take care of myself, and attend weddings. Now, I do not celebrate any wedding, I do not take care of myself and I have nothing to think about regarding my own future. It’s all over. Nothing matters to me anymore. Maybe my heart is black but if the young men are gone, what is left for us?!”*

*Safiyya*

So far, I tried to analyze three pairs of tensions (namely between contentment and grief, worldliness and otherworldliness, and the collectivization vs. the irreducible privacy of one’s grief) that the women related to the Hezbollah martyrs in Al-Dahiya experience in their journey of grief, and the way they try to resolve them. In this chapter, I would like to look at a case in which the discursive tradition of martyrdom as it is carried on in the community fails to soothe the pain of bereavement for one of my interlocutors: Safiyya. Safiyya, 58, lost her brother Abbass (whom she also raised) in the war in Syria. Her deep affection for him and her dissent with the Hezbollah intervention in Syria made it extremely hard for her to cope with the pain of her loss, let

alone transcend it. She could not avail herself of the collective narrative of the community due to her valorization of her brother's uniqueness of being above anything else.

By "uniqueness of being", I refer to the notion elaborated by Veena Das in her article "Voice as Birth of Culture" (Das, 1995). While examining cases of violence against women in India and Pakistan during and after the Partition (1947), Das explores whether culture allows one "to voice", i.e., to express and absorb loss and grief, or whether it stifles and suffocates it. She asks: Can loss when it is shared still entail an acknowledgement of the uniqueness, or unsubstitutability, of the being one lost? In order to answer this, she explores the meaning of voice and its relation to culture.

Following Das, I would like in this chapter to document ethnographically the voice of Safiyya that emerges as she tries to assert the uniqueness of being of her brother in front of a culture of grief that invites for a submersion of one's loss in the collective.

In order to do so, I will briefly present Das' argument and then I bring it to bear onto my interlocutor Safiyya's story and the social world that she inhabits.

### **"Voice as Birth of Culture"**

In the introduction of "Voice as Birth of Culture" (1995), Veena Das: "*Can one describe culture as having a soul? And what would it mean to answer this question in the affirmative?*"

In order to explore this question, Das draws on Wittgenstein's understanding of meaning as "standing next to word":

*“I see the notions of culture and voice standing next to each other, rather like word and meaning, but what this nextness implies is very difficult to conceptualize once and for all. There are constantly moving, dynamic, challenging, encompassing relations between culture as a societally agreed set of values which structure voice- and voice as appearing in transgression, proclaiming the truth of culture and relationships- yet allowing culture to be born not only as the external façade but as endowed with soul.”*

[p 160]

Although structurally shaped by culture, voice emerges in moments of transgression *“when the truth of culture and relationships must be proclaimed”*, in a challenge to culture. It allows culture to be born again, but *“this time endowed with a soul”*.

To better convey what she means by *“moments of transgression”* and the *“conditions under which conscience might be voiced”*, Das evokes one of the foundational myths of the Western canon, Antigone. It is the Lacanian interpretation of it that focuses her attention. Lacan locates Antigone as occupying a zone which he called *“the limit”*. The limit, or what Das in the article refers to as *“point in which death is engaged with life”* is a happening between deaths: the death of Polynices, Antigone’s brother, and her own awareness of the death that awaits her at the hand of Creon’s men after she broke the law of the state and insisted on giving her brother a proper burial. The compulsory occupation of this particular zone offers Antigone a chance to utter the unspeakable truth, to defy the law of the state and to insist on the *“uniqueness of being”* of her brother<sup>109</sup>.

---

<sup>109</sup> Antigone’s speech: *“Understand this, I would not have defied the law of the city, for a husband or a child to whom a tomb had been denied, because after all if I had lost a husband I could have taken another*

Lacan argues that at this moment, occupying the “limit”, Antigone imagines herself as already dead and separates herself into “*that which can be destroyed and that which must endure*”. She thus endures the pain of this disjuncture and expresses “the non-substitutability” of her brother. What distinguishes Lacan’s analysis, according to Das, from other interpretations of Antigone, is that “*the desire to affirm the uniqueness of being against the suffocation of culture is not located in the obsessive search for fulfillment of desire in submission to immediacy. Instead, the zone between two deaths is identified as the privileged domain within which the unspeakable truth about society may be spoken.*” [p 162]

Culture as the embrace of norms, or what Das describes as the adherence to societally proclaimed values alone, breaks down when it faces the articulation of voice from the limit. But it is also born again through an act of witnessing. When Antigone recognized her brother in the uniqueness of his being and not through the categories enjoined by tradition, she is born into culture again at the same time as she gives it a soul.

*“It [culture] is born again; it acquires a soul, in the act of hearing. When a person can bear witness to this form of suffering through the act of hearing, when the eye becomes transformed from the organ that sees to one that weeps, than we can speak of culture as having developed a soul.”*

Growing up in Al Dahiye, my interlocutors and I were not very familiar with Greek mythology. But reading Antigone’s story reminded me of a much more familiar figure: that of Sayyida Zaynabe.

---

and even if I had lost a child I could have made another child with another husband. But it concerned my brother, born of the same father and the same mother”.

## Antigone and Sayyida Zaynabe

There are striking parallels between Antigone and the figure of Sayyida Zaynabe as my interlocutors (and myself) learnt to imagine and understand her through religious education and ritual occasions (in the stories retold in Ashura consolation gatherings (*majālis 'azā'*) for example). Both figures grieve over a beloved brother and both try, while occupying the limit<sup>110</sup>, to assert the uniqueness of his being in front of a ruler: Creon in the case of Antigone, and Yazid ibn Mu'awiya in the case of Sayyida Zaynabe<sup>111</sup>.

What might be particular to Sayyida Zaynabe's story is the impact that her powerful voice had on the succession of historical events after her brother's martyrdom. In the wake of Ashura, people in the community will be told of the speech that Sayyida Zaynabe gave at Kufa, a speech said to have inspired Salman Bin Sird Al Khozai's revolt, called "Thawrat al-Tawwabīn", in 65 H against Yazid and Abdallah Ibn Ziyad's army.

---

<sup>110</sup> Sayyida Zaynabe also faced a serious threat of torture and death in Yazid's court.

<sup>111</sup> In her sermon in front of Al Al Kufah, Sayyida Zaynabe said:

"[...] how could you exonerate yourself from crime of slaying the son of the Last Prophet Muhammad (saw) and the mine of prophet-hood? Was he not the master of the youth in Heaven? Was he not the one who you would go to him whenever you had tribal fights and disagreements? Was he not your best choice to solve your own problems and worries? [...]"





*Figure 10: Antigone with Polynices' Body, Painting by Sebastien Norblin.*



*Figure 11: Sayyida Zaynabe with Imam Al-Husain's Body, Painter: Unknown.*

## A Contested Grief Narrative

Most importantly, as she is considered to be one of the two infallible (*ma'sūm*) witnesses of the Karbala massacre<sup>112</sup>, Sayyida Zaynabe's voice and the form she gave to her grief inspired a route for my interlocutors to make sense of their loss.

To illustrate this point, I would like to share some field notes I took from a consolation gathering (*majlis 'azā'*) for women that I attended during the celebration of Ashura in 2019 in Al-Dahiya:

*The majlis took place at my friend's house. Both the guest and living rooms were full with women seated in a full circle; almost everyone was wearing their hijab except two little girls and one woman in her forties, but everyone with no exception was wearing black. The reciter (qāri'a) of the majlis was an old woman. She held the microphone and then sat next to the window in the right corner of the room.*

[...]

*The sermon's title was: "which Zaynabe represents us?"*

*"We are hearing many stories about Sayyida Zaynabe these days. As if there are many Zaynabe and not one. But which Zayanbe is the true Zaynabe (al-ḥaqīqiyya), which Zaynabe represents us (tumattiluna)? And, most importantly, which Zaynabe should we emulate (bi-'ayyati zaynab 'alaynā 'an natamattal)?*

*The first Zaynabe cannot seem to be able to control herself, she cries all the time, she is a weeper (bakkā'a). And there is the Zaynabe who cried but was also patient (ṣabūra) and collected (mutamāsika) and never became desperate of God's mercy.*

---

<sup>112</sup> The other one is Imam Al-Sajjad Zayn-Al-Abidin.

*The first Zaynabe is impatient in her grief (jazi ‘a fi hozniha) to the point that she hit her head on the pole of a carriage, on which she was travelling, causing it to bleed<sup>113</sup>. This Zaynabe scratched her face and started beating her chest even though Husayn, her imam, told her not to. What kind of aspersion on Ahl-Al Bayt is this? The second Zaynabe stood in front of the most tyrannical of rulers in the middle of his court and when she was asked “how did you find what God did to your family?” she answered with all her fierceness: “I have not seen but beauty!”*

*The first Zaynabe, God forbid! tore her dress and showed her face. The second Zaynabe is a woman who knew that her hijab was as precious as the blood of the martyr Husayn so she stayed protector of it until the day she died (peace be upon her soul). This Zaynabe even protected her shadow from the eyes of men.*

*I say this first Zaynabe is strange to us and to Islam. We do not know her and thus we do not emulate her because her values are different than the ones cherished in Islam. She is weak, desperate, and she breached her own modesty (khādisha li ḥayā`ihā). The second Zaynabe is the only Zayanbe we know and the only Zaynabe we emulate”.*

In the tradition, Sayyida Zaynabe appears as a figure of transgression, just like Antigone, voicing the uniqueness of being of her brother Imam Husayn. But then, in the Ashura rituals that my interlocutors participate in, as she is turned more explicitly into a model for emulation, she becomes something slightly different: a model, yes, but not for her transgressive potential, rather for normative gender norms especially

---

<sup>113</sup> This is the main story on which practitioners of the ritual of taṭbīr rely for proving its justification and merit (reported in Bihar Al-Anwar).

regarding chastity and emotionality. The reciter's argument in the vignette clearly conveys this point: she tries to downplay certain aspects of the story of Sayyida Zaynabe, those in virtual tension with the overall constructions of gender and piety in the community, in order to compose what in the end amounts to a much "tamer" Zaynabe figure.

Therefore, on one side, we have Antigone and Sayyida Zaynabe as unique figures of transgression capable of making visible to us, waking us up to, "the uniqueness of being" — and then, they/she (Sayyida Zaynabe) gets absorbed through patterns of storytelling into a narrative in line with current patriarchal norms.

I will illustrate in the rest of this chapter how women who have suffered the loss of a dear one in Hezbollah's intervention in Syria deal with the tension that manifests itself upon realizing their incapability of embodying the dominant grief narrative and of emulating the model of Sayyida Zaynabe's grief.

What form of experience could emerge from one's incapacity to adapt to this dominant grief narrative? Could another grieving voice emerge in a moment of transgression and therefore endow culture with a soul? I will try to answer those two questions by evoking one story, that of Safiyya. Like Antigone and Sayyida Zaynabe, Safiyya also lost her brother Abbass. And like them, she voiced the uniqueness of his being as she occupied the limit, the zone between the two deaths: his martyrdom and her own death, since she keeps referring to herself as already dead.

### ***Safiyya's Story***

Safiyya was 58 year old when I came to know her. I met her through Batoul, a friend from university who lives in Al-Dahiya as well. Batoul was close friends with

Safiyya's niece Sanaa, and, upon learning about my project, she offered to introduce me to Safiyya. "You should meet Sanaa's aunt; she is *strangely* affected by the loss of her brother Abbass!" she said to me.

Safiyya comes from the famed family "xx", which carries a bad reputation for being clannish, having a military wing "that even Hezbollah cannot put under control" and for its men, said to be very obstinate and vengeful. We took a bus from next to my house to another neighborhood closer to the sea. Safiyya's family owns a small building; she lives on the first floor. When I asked Batoul about it, she said that "*this is how xx families live, always close to each other*". Sewage water was running in the small street when I visited, but it didn't seem to bother the three young boys who were playing football cheerfully and aggressively. Despite unorganized buildings and electric cables dangling chaotically, the street felt strangely like a beautiful rural neighborhood with its rather traditional architecture, shadowed by trees and other plantations.

The place was also extremely loud. A new mall was under construction on the right edge of the area, clamorously drawing the attention of nearby residents. When I arrived, Safiyya was shouting from the window at another group of kids who were making much noise while playing with cheap fireworks. She screamed: "*May your god and parents be cursed, you dogs!*" And when she noticed that we were marching toward her, she apologized, saying that noise in this street was driving her crazy.

Safiyya is a heavy smoker. She smoked over ten cigarettes during our two hours conversation. The deep lines on her face, her raspy, despondent voice and something about the way she put out the cigarette butts in the ash tray made her look considerably older. She wore a black shirt that was ripped on the sides with detergent stains all over it. I later learnt that she works as a cleaner in one of the organizations in

Al-Dahiya that take care of kids with special needs. With the growing economic crisis, the administration was complaining that the funds may be cut and Safiyya expressed her concern over the future of her job: *“They don’t ask about people like me. They can fire me any minute, as if I was a dog!”*

While she could have asked for help from her three remaining brothers, Safiyya was wary of the economic situation and that each one of them belabors to sustain his own family, so she didn’t want to a burden on them. According to the same rationale, and even after her parent’s deaths, Safiyya, who never got married, refused to move in with her older brother’s family in the same building on the third floor. She insisted that while her nephews and nieces loved her, she could only be “a heavy burden” for her brother and his wife. But now, given she might lose her job, she was seriously reconsidering her decision. She told me that she might put the house for rent and live out of it: *“But of course for that I will have to take all my siblings’ permission”* she said, *“The whole building is for our family, we will not feel very comfortable when strangers come to live with us”* — but she added that she might find herself obliged to resort to this solution when necessary.

Abbass was Safiyya’s youngest brother and her favorite, as her other siblings knew. The twenty-year gap between them, and the fact that Safiyya in effect raised him, made her feel as if he was her own son. Therefore, in our conversation, she kept referring to him as “brother” and “son” interchangeably. When I first explained to her my project, she insisted that she was not the typical sister of a martyr. “I am both the sister and the mother of Abbass,” she interrupted me firmly, “my grief over his loss is thus twice the grief of the other women related to the martyrs that you spoke to”. When she goes visiting his grave, she sometimes does not visit her parents’ graves although

they are in the same cemetery. “For them death was a right. They lived a long life and they saw their children get married and they played with their grandchildren, but Abbass died young”.

In the Islamic tradition, the end of one’s life is sometimes presented as a right. This right to death is different than, let’s say, the idea of the right to die in Hinduism, where it seems that a human being is entitled to end her life if she is tormented by terminal disease or has neither the desire nor the will to continue living. And while terminating one’s life is considered to be one of the major sins in Islam (*al-kabā’ir*), most hadiths acknowledge that life’s annihilation is not only natural but one of God’s prerogatives to separate the human soul from the body so that it can reach eternity. In the understanding of death widely shared in my community, the date of death is written on the baby’s forehead upon its birth, and *Azrael*, the Angel of Death, is said to look at individual Muslims’ faces 360 times per day, awaiting God’s order to catch their souls. However, and at the same time, if someone dies young, they are said to have died “before their age” (*māt qabil ‘umru*). For Safiyya, her parents’ death was “their right” because they “lived their life”. As for Abbass, his death, for her, was a brutal interruption of his life and one that came before its time, and this weighed very heavily on her.

Just like Safiyya was extremely attached to Abbass, he, too, was very fond of her. Although he was married and had a family of his own, she told me that his farewell to her was most emotional. She remembers that night vividly. There were forty days between his injury and his martyrdom. When he left again to the battlefield after he got injured the second time, he was leaning on a cane. The doctor warned him not to go, but he wouldn’t listen. Safiyya was so angered at him because he was determined to go and

she strongly objected to his decision.<sup>114</sup> They were sitting in the living room, and he asked her to make him a cup of tea. She refused to do so, and furiously told him to go ask it from his other sister, Sanaa, who seemed to be much more at ease with his decision to join the battle again. But Abbass persisted that Safiyya should be the one to make the tea. So, she silently went to the kitchen and started preparing it.

Here Abbass' insistence that Safiyya, nobody else, make his tea speaks to a negotiation of their relationship. Although anchored in the dominant patriarchal scripts of society, namely those pertaining to the domestic obligations of a woman towards her brother, his request evokes a cultural subtext of care. In asking her to make tea, Abbass might be implying to Safiyya: "I care for you and I want you to care back." When Safiyya stops resisting and goes to make the tea, she accepts Abbass' subtle request of care and her silence indicates the compulsion with which she yields to his decision to leave for battle.

As she put the tea pot on the gas and was waiting for it to boil, Safiyya lied down on a sofa in the kitchen. Abbass came, sat on the edge of the sofa, next to Safiyya's feet and started teasing her to make her laugh. He begged her to look him in the eyes and talk to him. But she kept avoiding his eyes, until she could not hold her tears anymore. She begged him not to go, but he told her that he had to.

It is at this moment that Safiyya's heart ached and knew that it was the last time that she would see Abbass, she told me, although she kept praying for God to return him home safely. And, like almost every single grieving story I heard from my interlocutors, where they would tell me that they could sense in their bodies that their

---

<sup>114</sup> Safiyya was the only interlocutor to admit that she objected her brother's participation in the fights. And as I conducted my fieldwork, I felt that it was a sort of taboo to say so.



husband, fiancé, son or brother was going to become a martyr, Safiyya's heart was right. Abbass never returned.

Abbass fell as a martyr on a Saturday night. Also Safiyya remembers minutely that Saturday, too. She couldn't sleep. She felt that her heart was being cut out from her chest. The following day, she felt the same ache. Her neighbor came to her in a hurry and reported that she saw a shooting star coming down on Abbass' house in the village. Safiyya screamed while crying: "pray to God that he is only wounded and not a martyr!" But the pain she was feeling in her heart intimated to her that he had fallen as a martyr.

*"The heart of the believer is her guide, and Abbass is also my son, not only my brother. The heart of the mother feels when something is wrong because her kids become pieces of it. Abbass is a piece of my heart."*

Safiyya's family got the news on Monday. During the ceremony dedicated to his funeral, a bird landed on the window, and he didn't leave until the funeral ended. Safiyya told me that it was Abbass.

In the tradition, after leaving the body, the soul of the dead is said to keep roaming around for three days to make sure that the family remembers. The bird is a common holder of a soul since it allows it to fly freely within Al-Dunya before joining the other dead in Al-Barzakh.

Safiyya recalls the earliest period of her bereavement as one in which she had received excessive affection and support from her family. Everyone seemed to understand the tremendous pain that she must have felt due to her special connection to Abbass. She grieved for him more than she did when her parents died.

In my community's understanding and construction of "natural love", a mother's bereavement over her children, especially the male ones, is felt most painfully. Hence, the family felt empathetic towards Saffiya's loss, because they knew that Abbas was her only child, as she didn't have one of her own.

It may be argued that such an understanding constructs the female self in accordance with the dominant cultural paradigms, which is true. Yet, we shall see later that the fact that this cultural representation is mapped to a great extent on Safiyya's self, is also what allow her to transgress social norms when her social context altered and evoked in her the need to express the uniqueness of being of Abbas.

Things started taking another turn when Safiyya's grief did not grow dim with time. She does not recollect when that started, especially since after Abbas' martyrdom "*time got gloomy*", but her brothers wives started making comments over how much she was exaggerating, "*as if he was killed, and had not become a martyr*". One day, as she was shouting with a sorrowful voice "Abbas!", her older brother came and asked her to shut up and to stop making such a scene. He told her this is not what Sayyida Zaynabe would have done, and that she had people talk badly about her for not being patient enough.

This single statement makes clear how much the normative way of grieving affects how one is perceived in the community. For her sisters-in-law and her brother, her aesthetic of grief was not aligned with what they considered to be a proper way of grieving over a martyr "*as if he was dead and not a martyr*." Thus it was deemed to be exaggerated and came across as lacking authenticity. "*Stop making such a scene*" – her aesthetic of grief might have caused Safiyya to progressively lose their initial empathy,

and now they began to worry about how Safiyya's grief might be perceived in the community and how it would affect their family's image.

Their taunting remarks started to make Safiyya feel guilty. So she tried to restrain herself. But she could not, and eventually gave up on trying to restrain her grief. She reopened the drawer where she keeps Abbass' clothes and socks, sat on the edge of the bed, and started getting a whiff of them, bursting into tears and screeching immensely. As she described it:

*It's hard; Oh Allah knows how much it's backbreaking. Next November, it will be his martyrdom's seventh anniversary, and my heart hasn't cooled off yet. I alone drank the sorrow of his death. I drank his sorrow as his mother and his father and his sister. I grieved on behalf of all of them.*

Safiyya evokes the cultural idea that one could (and even sometimes should) grieve on behalf of someone else who has died and was not able to witness the annihilation of someone they loved. It is this idea, along with her insistence on confirming the uniqueness of Abbass, instead of labeling him as just another martyr, that made it harder for Safiyya to listen to her family's remarks and to have a certain closure for her grief.

*My brothers often get mad at me and they tell me to forget him. I tell them 'No one is feeling my sorrow! I do not want to forget him. When I eat, I remember Abbass. When I drink, I remember Abbass. When I talk to people, I remember Abbass. This is my son and my brother and my neighbor. All the women around me urge me to have taşabbur and to be like Sayyida Zaynabe. But I swear to God, it's out of my hands, I swear to God that it is difficult to do. I know that he is a martyr, but at the same time I cannot toughen up my heart. The Prophet Mohammad has been asked what was more*

*painful than death and he answered: 'the parting'. And the parting is killing me. I know that he is still alive because the martyrs are "Indeed they are alive." But I long for the reunion and I pray for it to take place before long.*

Safiyya expressed her longing for the reunion with Abbass, meaning in a way her own death, through her disinterest in living. She stayed two years without turning her TV on. Her friends were constantly inviting her to join them for excursions but *"now they gave up, knowing that there is no way I will agree to come."* She stopped taking care of herself and rarely buys new clothes.

*These days, I only come back home from work, watch TV series and then go to bed. I do not care about this thing called Safiyya anymore. I am worthless without my brother.*

Up to this point, I have described the events of Safiyya's life after the martyrdom of her brother/son primarily in her voice. Let me now share one excerpt of our interview that adds another dimension to her story followed by some reflections on it:

*R: Does knowing that your brother died in Syria with Hezbollah bring you relief?*

*S: No it doesn't. This whole Syria thing did not convince me. It is not our land and we didn't buy it!*

*R: So if the war was against Israel, would it have been better for you?*

*S: Yes, definitely! Oh my regret over the guys we lost!*

*R: When Sayyid Hassan speaks, does he comfort you?*

*S: (with a strong denying head shake): Nothing comforts me. The embers only burn those who are holding them.<sup>115</sup> Neither will he feel the loss of Abbass nor will you. I know he lost his eldest son and his other one is wounded, but nevertheless he surely will not understand the way I am feeling. No one can understand what I am feeling.*

*R: Do you attend the Hezbollah's martyrs' commemorations and the other ceremonies?*

*S: I used to never miss one. But they started kicking me out because of how much I cry. It irritates them. Last time I went, there was a military parade of the Hezbollah soldiers. They carry 100 kg of military outlets on their backs and then they die. (She sobs) And we stay in the comfort of our houses and we only eat, drink and sleep. Grieving and bewailing is the least we can do. Is it too much if we feel sorrowful and mournful? I went last week to a neighbor whose son is a recent martyr. She opened her door to the visitors smiling. Can you believe it?! She was smiling all the time. I say this is not normal. It is either cold-heartedness or tasabbur. But it is absolutely impossible for this to be normal (natural). I tasted it (meaning this grief). All my life has changed. I used to go out, take care of myself and my looks, and go to weddings. Now, I do not celebrate any wedding, I do not take care of myself and I have nothing to think about regarding my own future. It's all over. Nothing matters to me anymore. Every time someone dies I scream Oh Abbass! Oh Abbass! People now do not inform me about funerals so I do not go. I tell them: "My heart is black on the inside. I feel it. It's black inside. Every time someone tells me about a dead I remember Abbass. He was too young. He didn't see his boy grow. Maybe my heart is black, but if the young men are gone, what is left for us?!"*

---

<sup>115</sup> Arabic proverb meaning that one's pain cannot be felt by someone else.

## Reflections

My research on the social and cultural experiences of the women related to the Hezbollah's martyrs, have been instigated by my encounter with a Damascene woman in a Syrian Army-Hezbollah cemetery next to the Sayyida Zaynabe Mosque. This chapter, I feel, brings the research full circle.

I evoked here only one story, that of Safiyya, and showed how the martyrdom of her brother Abbas in Al Quneitra in Syria got woven into the events of her life in a manner that makes the vulnerability of the grieving sister appear in stark relief. Safiyya's grief transformed her life to the point that she, like Antigone who made a dramatic pronouncement of her death, refers to herself as being "*already dead*". Unlike the other women that I met who seemed to more or less adhere to the received norms of their lifeworlds in the ways in which they commemorate the memories of those who are martyred, Safiyya could not be soothed by the dominant grief narrative, and insisted instead on proclaiming the uniqueness of her brother Abbas and their unique relationship, refusing, again like Antigone, to let it lie unacknowledged. Safiyya, like that bereaved Syrian mother, expressing regret over the loss of a loved one, could not have done so without condemning the culture of the community that she takes a part in. In a daring act of transgression, between two deaths, that of Abbas and her own, "*I do not think of this thing called Safiyya anymore. I am worthless without my brother*", Safiyya voiced her disapproval of the Hezbollah intervention in Syria and the resulting "*lost*" men. She actively engages in a particular aesthetic of grief in which she overtly displays her sorrow by the constant doing of a number of things: Shouting Abbas in other people's funerals, insisting on wearing black after almost nine years of

bereavement, refusing to attend her family's weddings, declining her friends' requests for sociability, and a constant effacing of her own needs. However, by challenging the dominant grief narrative, and not adhering to the emulation of the dominant Sayyida Zaynabe's model for grieving, Safiyya became "the castaway of the official face of culture", as Das puts it. She does not get invited to the commemoration of the other martyrs anymore; and she lost the initial empathy of her family.

In the beginning of this chapter I asked: What form of experience could emerge from one's incapability of appropriating the dominant grief narrative?

In narrating Safiyya's story, one possible answer could emerge. When she describes her heart as being black, Safiyya expresses that her laboring to "*restore her sanity*", and becoming a good Zaynabiyya, failed. And, after almost nine years of trial, she surrendered to this failure. Safiyya's seeming incapacity to receive the divine forbearance (*taṣabbur*), like other women did, leads her to locate a deficiency within her and to depict her heart as being black. In a way, this could be seen as a form of self-loathing, but I see it as a way for Safiyya to reject her culpability in her failure to emulate the dominant Sayyida Zaynabe model and to surrender her need to self-governance in the authoritative fashion.

How could one seize a culture's soul in the realm of the everyday for the women related to the Hezbollah's martyrs? To me, it seems that glimpses of this soul appear at the moments of transgression, when women fail to abide by the dominant grief narrative or, put differently, when it fails to serve them properly.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I tried to document ethnographically three pairs of tension, namely between contentment and grief, worldliness and otherworldliness and, the collectivization and the privacy of one's grief, that my interlocutors, mothers, sisters, wives, fiancées and lovers of Hezbollah's martyrs, encountered and negotiated during their grief process.

In the first chapter, I described the importance of calibrating one's emotions following the martyrdom of one's relative. The stories of my interlocutors Fatima and Zaynabe helped me demonstrate how challenging it could be to be walking the thin line between showing appreciation for the honorable death that took place in a way which reflects assertion of the high standing of martyrdom in the tradition and the social imaginary of the community, and at the same time expressing grief. Incited to show bereavement by some people around them, both women were invited to acknowledge the sacrifices made by the martyr, themselves and the whole community. And although my project has been instigated by my encounter with the Damascene woman and the way her expression of regret struck me, Fatima and Zaynabe showed me that a calculated display of regret and sorrow is also often demanded from my interlocutors by the community.

In this chapter, I also learned about the centrality of the concept of path for my interlocutors' understanding of their experience of martyrdom especially because of the key analogy they establish between the path of Hezbollah (the path of the resistance) and the righteous path (*aṣ-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) in the Islamic tradition.



The second chapter between worldliness and otherworldliness is divided into three sections. The first one shows how the realm of dreams offers a platform through which the continuous relationship with the martyrs takes shape. The visitational dream-visions of the martyrs, which Sarah and Fatima for example shared with me, showed how dreams also could serve as a source of ethical guidance and moral counseling and help create an imaginary web of connections not only with the martyr and the dreamer but with the dreamer and other people around her.

The second section is inspired by Asmaa' story that helps illustrate what is meant by witnessing the martyr's martyrdom (*shahāda*). The Islamic tradition distinguishes between three types of martyrdom: the martyr of *al-dunyā* and *al-'ākhira*, the martyr of *al-dunyā* and the martyr of *al-'ākhira*. I learnt that my interlocutors try to specifically witness that their martyr is a martyr of the first category through employing specific storytelling strategies.

And because this category refers to a systematic balance between *al-dunyā* and *al-'ākhira* (between worldly and otherworldly matters) that the martyr tried to accomplish in his *dunyā* life, I tried in the third section of this chapter to show how my interlocutors Sarah and Zahraa feel the urge to sustain a quotidian attention to *al-dunyā* and *al-'ākhira* while bearing legacy of the martyr's martyrdom.

When I first started conceiving the project, I imagined that my interlocutors would solely refer to the emulation of Sayyida Zaynabe in their grief . But I then understood that the martyr, being chosen by God, offers a more tangible source of emulation to them. Sarah and Zahraa took me with them on their journey of performing *jihād* (through disciplining themselves, *jihād al-nafs*, and as wives and mothers), but

also through becoming a living embodiment of the martyr's righteous cause in the community and hence becoming martyrs (*shahidāt*) themselves.

The third chapter between the collectivization and the irreducible privacy of one's grief attempts at giving a more holistic picture of the way most of my interlocutors account for their experience of grief. I tried to investigate vital notions such as the inspiration from Sayyida Zaynabe and the historical narrative of Ashura, the emulation of Sayyida Zaynabe that gets rewarded by a divine forbearance (*taṣabbur*) mediated through her by God and the obligation to return such glorious gift through the collectivization of the grief (through which the martyr becomes the martyr of the whole community and not just the woman related to him). This collectivization stands in sharp tension with the private aspects of one's grief, especially when it comes to recognize the uniqueness of being of the martyr.

The fourth chapter deals with this question through the story of Safiyya. What does happen when what a woman honors the most is the uniqueness of being of the martyr and thus, she cannot find solace in the narratives offered by the community and is unable to receive the divine forbearance?

## REFERENCES

1. Blandford, Nicholas. 2011. *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle against Israel*. Random House.
2. Das, Venna. 1995. *Voice as Birth of Culture*. *Ethnos*, 60:3-4, 159-179, DOI:10.1080/00141844.1995.9981516
3. Foucault, Michel. 1985. "Dream, Imagination and Existence." In: Ludwig Binswanger, Michel Foucault, "Dream and Existence. Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry, v. XIX, no.1.
4. Freud, Sigmund. 1899. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Published September 15th 1994 by Barnes & Noble (first published 1899).
5. Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press.
6. Mittermaier, Amira. 2010. *Dreams that Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination*. University of California Press.
7. Norton, Augustus Richard. 2009. *Hezbollah: A Short History*. Princeton University Press.

