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Books, Libraries, and Archives

Paper No. 5

12 November 2018

Women's Roles Explored through Martyrdom

Modern society has given an entirely new meaning to the word "selfishness," allowing for a more forgiving definition under the assumption that taking care of oneself first leads to a better ability to take care of others. Despite this, we have maintained an admiration for the martyr, particularly the religious and the patriotic martyr. However, this respect can lead to a scorn for those who choose life instead of sacrificing for one's religion or country. The theme of martyrdom and sacrifice was prevalent throughout Rachel Kadish's novel, *The Weight of Ink*. For the sake of this discussion, death is not necessarily a condition of martyrdom, nor does it necessarily apply to religion. Social martyrdom will also be discussed, or when one does not sacrifice to maintain the social order, also including the notion that martyrdom is kindness. Kadish uses both religious and social martyrdom as an instrument for women's empowerment by examining the idea of women choosing their own path in life.

Kadish uses the mass suicide of Masada as the foundational example of martyrdom that provides a background for the Jewish persecution that was discussed throughout the novel. Due to Roman persecution around 73 CE, Jews had taken refuge in the fortress of Masada, waiting for the Romans to march upon them. However, once accepting that defeat was inevitable, all of the men killed their wives and children and then turned their swords upon themselves. According to the historian Flavius Josephus, these actions were prompted by a speech made by a leader

Eleazar, who said, “it is misery to live, and not to die. For death freeth our souls from prison unto their most pure and proper place, where never after they shall be touched with any calamity [...] Of necessity we must now die,” (Josephus 759). Instead of undergoing torture or death by the hands of the Romans, the Jews of Masada chose to kill themselves, which was seen as an admirable act by the Romans who found them and by following generations of Jews. However, the reason Josephus knew this story was because two women hid in a cave while the mass suicide was taking place, choosing to live. In *The Weight of Ink*, a tour guide called them “traitors” and insulted their “cowardice” (Kadish 157). The next generations of Jews were supposed to follow the example set by the martyrs, not by the “cowards” who lived and became slaves to the Romans.

In response to the disgust the tour guide expressed for the two women who chose to live, Helen demanded to know, “*why* [it was] cowardly to want to live,” (158). The tour guide did not answer her, assuming that she would not understand a concept and history that was so dear to the Jews. While Helen was literally questioning the extent to which we should condemn those who did not choose to be martyrs, there could also be an underlying rebuttal of the traditional roles of women. When questioning the tour guide, Helen asks, “Why were those women traitors?” (158). When taken out of the context of Masada, Kadish could have been challenging the idea that women should self-sacrifice in order to adhere to society’s image of a perfectly meek and self-effacing female.

Not coincidentally, two of the only virtually unquestionable martyrs were both men: rabbi HaCoen Mendes and Dror. The rabbi devoted his life to his religion, suffering through sacrifices but never wavering in his faith. He had been interrogated and tortured during the Jewish

persecution and was blinded as a result. However, he does carry the burden of guilt because, "had they asked [him] to deny [...] God, [he] would have done so," (405). He also professes guilt over his sin of having, "wanted death [...] for blindness can never suffice to extinguish the sight of the terrors of this broken world," (405). Despite his self-condemnation, martyrdom seems so ingrained in who he is that it seems to be an unquestionable truth, evidenced by his lifetime devotion to God and to God's people. Dror shared the rabbi's strong connection to religion and had a willingness to die for it. In fact, it is assumed in the novel that Dror died as covert intelligence for his religion and his country (240). Dror would have chosen his religion and history over Helen if he was given the opportunity, but Helen decided to choose life. It is insinuated that Helen is speaking of Dror when she says, "Denying that - thinking there's only one noble path above the fray - can be a poisonous approach to life," (483). She accuses martyrdom and such blind devotion of producing a narrow mindset. Having two males as the main martyrs is not to say that women are never martyrs or that being one is supporting female suppression. It is simply drawing a parallel between how society expects women to conform and how the women in the novel choose to determine their own path.

Rivka, the rabbi's housekeeper is not easily classified as either a martyr or a skeptic, embodying more characteristics of a "failed martyr." She devoted a significant portion of her life to the rabbi, always faithfully serving him and ignoring her own feelings toward him. Only once is Rivka's underlying feelings revealed: when she wished the rabbi was calling out for her when he was sick (388). Rivka also disregarded the fact that she could read, something that comes as a shock to both Ester and to the reader (441). Within context of the novel, which stresses the importance or "weight" of the word, Rivka neglecting her education is a major sacrifice. Rivka

also seemed to rather die than be captured by the Christian mob outside of Mary's house. However, she was not capable of plunging the knife into her chest; only producing a small trickle of blood (460). She had too much "cowardice" to be a martyr. Rivka also expressed a wish to die, which has already been established in the discussion of rabbi HaCoen Mendes as a characteristic that should not be present in a martyr (440). As a further offense to martyrdom, Rivka stood by as Ester renounced the Jewish faith in order to save their lives (467). While Rivka may have the heart of a martyr and the desire to be one, she has the stomach of a person who wants to live. However, she is most certainly not a skeptic, as she is capable of ardent devotion, both to the rabbi and to her religion. Rivka continues her life after the plague and the mob running the house of Ester and Alvaro and is thriving as a strong woman who has moved on from her past. She is evidence that being a "failed martyr" does not make one into a lesser person and it does not have to affect one's future. Although she may not have consciously chosen the path she is on, she demonstrates that there is more than one path that a person, and more specifically a woman, can take.

Ester is constantly questioning the acceptable extent of martyrdom, manifesting a prime example of how a woman can refuse to comply to societal constructs or religious constraints present in her community. After the rabbi's death and Mary accuses Rivka of wanting to die, Ester challenges this contradiction: "Why is it a sin against God to wish for death - yet a virtue to choose to die in defense of God's word?" (438). Rivka and the rabbi both secretly wish for death, but both consider it a sin. However, both also consider it brave to choose death over being captured or renouncing their faith. Ester does not accept this contradiction and when confronted with death, she thinks, "She can believe, now, that some of the martyrs sang on the pyre," (438).

Perhaps Kadish's most direct attack on traditional women's roles is when she has Ester write against society's image of women as self-sacrificing. "Women [...] must give every element of her life to others. Kindness is at all times counseled to women, who are called unnatural if not kind," (518). Kindness can be a form of martyrdom, if it includes sacrificing in order to support others. Ester questions this by asking, "Yet how can a kindness that blights the life of even one—though it benefit others—be called good? Is it in fact kindness to sever oneself from one's own desires? [...] Then must we abandon our accustomed notion of a woman's kindness, and forge a new one," (518). Martyrdom itself wrestles against the desire for life and the pressure placed on women to self-sacrifice detracts from leading a fulfilled life. Kadish is bluntly challenging societal constructs and advocating a strong, independent woman; using the theme of martyrdom prevalent throughout the novel to achieve it.

Ester is arguably the principal demonstration of women's empowerment, as she not only questions religious martyrdom, but she challenges social martyrdom in the 1600's, a time of female suppression. As discussed above, Ester does not believe in self-sacrificing to adhere to societal constructs or to maintain a social order that may benefit others, namely men. Her heart lies with expressing herself and cultivating her thoughts through writing, which she does not want to give up in any circumstances. However, in that time period, she would be as good as dead without a husband, especially since she was a Jew, and the husband would probably want Ester to abstain from writing in order to take care of the house and the children like the perfect, compliant woman (227). Despite this, Ester refused to marry, instead taking every advantage to further her writing and correspondence with other intellectuals. In the beginning of her rebellion, she selfishly used the rabbi's candles, and ultimately his money, to study by candlelight after the

rabbi had retired for the night (181). As her hunger for knowledge and the written word increased, she created a ploy to return to writing and created a crisis in Florence that the rabbi thought needed his immediate attention (271). The rabbi thought that Ester was transcribing his words in letters to his pupil in Florence, but Ester was actually writing her own words and corresponding with the intellectuals of the Enlightenment. Once discovered, the deception wounded the rabbi, and the injury was aggravated by the content of the letters, as it was a direct opposition to the rabbi's beliefs and words. However, one could also argue that the fictitious Florence crisis was the reason the rabbi lived for as long as he did, as he felt that his people needed him.

To achieve her aim of intellectual correspondence, Ester had to assume a male's name, Thomas Farrow, in order to be taken seriously, which negatively affects the historical record. There have been numerous studies that examine the significant impact a scribe has on how readers perceive a text. There is a fine line between simply copying and making enough changes to create an actual authorship of a document (van der Heijden 34). A study performed by Daniel Wakelin investigates scribes who sought to avoid creativity altogether, instead seeking to obtain the utmost accuracy (Wakelin 252). This proves against mindless copying, as scribes demonstrate thought when refusing to write words or phrases through doubt of accuracy (252). However, Wakelin also mentions scribes who willfully stray from the original because they found it too politically intense (as in the case of a scribe during the 15th century who said, "I dar write no Forther.") or too absurd (as in the case of a scribe of the Canterbury Tales who was copying *The Squire's Tales*) (257-258). A study by Tamara Perez-Fernandez furthers the argument of scribal impact by studying in-depth a scribe named Richard Osbarn to prove how

knowing the identity of a scribe and their background can revolutionize the study of manuscripts because they reveal textual differences and the reasons behind them (Perez-Fernandez 241-242). She claims that "with the increasing awareness of the relevance of the modes of manuscript production and their effects on how readers interpreted and received the texts, the significance of the scribes has become ever more apparent" (241). These studies prove that scribal duties are those of deep importance; deviations from original texts impacting the work as a whole. *The Weight of Ink* places an emphasis on the power or "weight" of the word, exploring how it can connect individuals across time and space. Therefore, Ester's scribal rebellion has consequences as shown in Derek Godwin's research on Thomas Farrow. Godwin thought that "Farrow [was] the next big discovery on the philosophy scene," (Kadish 144). He was not aware that Farrow was actually Ester under the guise of a male, which led to inaccuracy and an accidental omission of a revolutionary woman in the 17th century, which could have actually been the next big discovery.

Whether the reader condones Ester's actions or not, it is undeniable that she does not let society's concepts of acceptable female behavior hinder her. She designs her own course and does not choose to be a martyr in any sense to benefit anybody else. Perhaps she is too selfish, but it reiterates the point that women do not have to be martyrs in order to thrive, like society impresses upon all females, particularly during the 1600's.

Kadish wrote all of the female protagonists of the novel as a contradiction to the male martyrs to explore the idea of women following their own will. She examines the lengths a women would go to in order to attain their utmost desires, despite those desires being nearly

impossible to realize. Most importantly, she opposes the judgement of condemning those unwilling to be a martyr, and therefore those unwilling to bow down to the social order.

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