

Ghassan Kanafan, *I Men in the Sun and Resistance*

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Do we exist? What proof do we have? The further we get from the Palestine of our past, the more precarious our status, the more disrupted our being, the more intermittent our presence. When did we become a people? When did we stop being one? Or are we in the process of becoming one?

(Said, 1994, p. 108)

Men in the Sun is the first of Ghassan Kanafani's published novels. It is the most accomplished novel inspired by the Palestinian tragedy and deals with the Palestinians' search for identity in a hostile world, where their very existence was being challenged. It was written in 1962 while Kanafani was in Lebanon and went hiding at home for more than a month because he lacked official documents. It was published in 1963. The novel has been translated into numerous languages and turned into several screenplays. The novel set the starting point of Kanafani's literary journey to participate in the battle for history and it gained him reputation which persuaded him to pursue the literary path to serve his people, who were scattered everywhere, struggling to make a living. Kanafani's skills as a critic of the society and leadership, and his visions and outlooks are noticeably present in the novel.

In the short novel, Kanafani recalls the miserable journey his companions and he had in their attempt to sneak into Kuwait. It tells the story of three Palestinians, who are seeking an alternative to the abject sufferings of refugee camps and making a futile attempt to illegally cross the Iraqi-Kuwait borders in search of a better future. Each of them represents a different generation and signifies the prolonged history of suffering of the Palestinians. They do not know one another. Abu Qais, the old man, As'ad, the young man and Marwan, the youth, meet with Abul Khaizuran, a self-appointed smuggler and driver of a water carrier. The water truck belonged to a wealthy Kuwaiti merchant and it is not subjected to a search at the border. For Abul Khaizuran, the plan to smuggle them into Kuwait was simple. Since the tank is empty, he can take all of them with him until just before two borders, where they will hide inside the empty water tank. The trick succeeds in the first checking point in Safwan, but in the second, their luck turns bad. Bureaucrats at the second border, Mutlaa, delayed to sign papers, making unnecessary obscene jokes of Abul Khaizuran, who is a eunuch. By the time he returns to open the tank they were suffocated to death in the scorching heat of the sun. Then Abul Khaizuran drives out the dead bodies to one of Kuwait's garbage dumps. Finally he justifies his stand, when he lost resistance, shouting: "Why didn't they bang on the walls of the truck?" (Kanafani, 1999, p. 65). In order to come up with the elements of resistance theme to analyze the following is necessary: firstly, the characters, who bespeak the real Palestinian dilemma; secondly, the Palestinian land and the Palestinian space and time, around which resistance themes are evolving and thirdly, the novel as an organic whole describing the vulnerable Palestinian situation and urgently demanding a humane solution and resisting the present situations.

Kanafani's integrated approach of dealing with reality and symbolism, gives the novel a specific literary power, which operates upon various political and ethical levels. Characters in the novel are fully drawn from the weaknesses and sufferings of camps. Kanafani's criticism of the contemporary Palestinian reality has been carried out in the story of "men in the sun," Abu Qais, As'ad and Marwan. They better represent Palestinians, who overwhelmed with passivity and overdependence on others, dream of a future which they have neither the knowledge nor the power to bring into being. They no more belong to the past, because they have been disconnected from the land with the catastrophe of 1948. Their present is meager, because they are non-entities without an identity. Only the future holds any hope or promise to them. Portraying their past, present and future, Kanafani narrates the puzzled Palestinian situation from 1948 until early stages of 1960. Palestinians were lost in hope. Their past remained bitter and the present meager. They were passive, inactive and pessimistic. They dreamed of a colorful future, but they are misled by the futility of their belief in impotent leadership. Moreover, the quest for the individual salvation overwhelmed their nationalistic feeling. In other words, Kanafani's matter-of-fact portrayal of the characters adds to the social realism in the novel.

Characters in the novels better represent the intended resistant theme of the novel. Their total dependence on hypocritical leadership for a solution, their resigned passivity of accepting fate's ultimatum, and their blindness about the political reality are gravely addressed by in the novel. They stand for Palestinians who are being humiliated in other countries and thrown out like disposables once benefit out of them are finished. Though they are deeply attached to the homeland, their existence and identity as the people of the land remains only in their memories. In other words, the futile attempt of three Palestinians to seek a personal security, free from the bitterness of present and bright with promises for a secure future opposed Kanafani's historical attempt of re-gaining identity for Palestinians as people of the land. It is this dream that set their direction away from the homeland. Such an attempt, according to Kanafani, should end in disaster or a tragic death. Their relationship and longings towards Palestine are superficial. For example, Abu Qais's commitment to the homeland and his memory about it are confined in "ten trees with twisted trunks which shed olives and prosperity" (1999, p. 26). Since last ten years, he has done nothing but wait. Even to be convinced that he has lost his youth, home, his whole village and olive trees, he needed ten big hungry years.

Abu Qais proudly remembers the fate of Ustaz Salim, his son's schoolteacher in their village, who died one night before their village was attacked by the Jews. For him, dying in the homeland is a blessing from God and Ustaz Salim was certainly lucky for he died "one night before the wretched village fell into the hands of the Jews" (1999, p. 23). Moreover, according to Abu Qais, it is really a divine favour to Ustaz Salim that he was buried in the homeland; "... all the same you stayed there ... you saved yourself humiliation and wretchedness. The mercy of God be upon you, Ustaz Salim. If you had lived, if you had been drowned by poverty as I have... would you have been willing to carry all your years on your shoulders and flee across the desert to Kuwait to find a crust of bread?" (1999, p. 23). Though Abu Qais is inspired by Ustaz Salim, people like him, instead of advancing further towards the goal, were engulfed in tragic passivity. Though he is unenthusiastic about the future, he dreams of the other side, "Just the other side, where there are all the things he had been deprived of. Over there was Kuwait. What only lived in his mind as a dream and a fantasy existed there. It was certainly something real, of stones, earth, water, and sky, not as it slumbered in his troubled mind. There must be lanes and streets, men and women, and children..." (1999, p. 25). In Kuwait, Abu Qais hopes to find money to send his children to school, to buy a small house and perhaps even one or two olive shoots.

On the other hand, Marwan the young man who left school wants to get some education and experience. He has mixed feelings and is unable to make up his mind. His father is like Abu Qais, another symbol of laziness and passivity. Life, for him, "is an extraordinary business". As an old man, he just wants to settle down, and not find himself obliged to feed his children.... His old friend, Shafiq's father, suggested that he marry her. She owned a three-roomed house on the edge of the town, which she had bought with the money collected for her by a charity" (1999, p. 40). Marwan's father thought about the matter; if he let two rooms and lived with his lame wife in the third, he would live out the rest of his life in security, untroubled by any thing, and more important than that, under a concrete roof. It is upon Marwan, who is just sixteen, the responsibility of feeding his four siblings. "Who else will buy May's clothes, and bring back bread for Riyad, Salma, and Hasan? Who?" He must find in Kuwait the means to provide for his mother, who has been deserted not only by her husband for another woman, but by her eldest son who, already working in the Gulf, has ceased sending the remittances necessary to support the family he left behind (1999, p. 41).

Finally, As'ad represents the young generation. He is fleeing from the cultural traditions of conservative Palestinian society, which insists on arranging the marriages for their children based on few superstitions. For him, Kuwait means freedom; freedom from his uncle, who gave fifty dinars, and wants him to marry his daughter. Again his uncle, like Abu Qais, represents the old folk who do not possess any dream, but profess to superstitions. He thinks that just because he had recited the Fatihah with As'ad's uncle and for Nada and As'ad were born on the same day, he should to marry her off As'ad. He considered that was fate and he had refused a hundred suitors who had asked for his daughter's hand and told them she was engaged. As'ad is very angry with him, "O! God of devils! Who told him that he, Assad, wanted to marry her? Who told him that he ever wanted to get married?" (1999, p. 33).

Through the dispossessed "men in the sun", Kanafani represents the real events and attacks the Palestinian mentality. In a way of defying the loss of their country, they were led by impotent leaders to further misery. Abu Khaizuran, the impotent driver was carrying them in the huge lorry, "Together with their dreams, their failures, their hopes and

ambitions, their misery and despair, their strength and weakness, their past and future, as it were pushing against the immense door to a new, unknown destiny..." (1999, p. 61). Instead of prosperous future, they were engulfed in the tragedy of poor and anonymous death, in the burning heat of water tank and without even banging on its walls. This symbolizes the silence pervaded in the refugee camps during 1960s. This hapless situation of the camps invoked Kanafani to write about death. Death is the enemy of any virility. It stands for frustration, and symbolizes bad supervision. Kanafani spoke of death in *Men in the Sun* stronger than ever before. Neither Kuwait nor a "Promised Land" answered their demands. That is because they didn't prepare themselves for a self-determined place in history nor they protested against the corrupted leadership. As Kanafani wrote in *Land of Sad Oranges*, the Palestinians didn't try "to understand what the story meant from beginning to end." Instead of looking for a real solution to the issue, for many years, they lived blind to the political reality. An indirect suggestion about the bloom in Israel is made here by Kanafani. Sa'd's, another young man who has made his fortune, should be in this of this. He scorn Abu Qais, "People have been making their own way during these long years, while you have been squatting like an old dog in a miserable hut. What do you think you were waiting for?" (1999, p. 26).

Kanafani's sentiments towards the homeland are very obvious in the novel, to the extent that it stands up as an historic and cultural statue. It is as pertinent as the PLO Research Center, the film and photographic archives of the Palestine cinema organization in the "struggle for re-discovering identity and history". For him, the core of the conflict is in their attachment to the land and the "success must start at home from one's own country." Hence according to him, every Palestinian urges, hopes and desires should be encircled with Palestine. Even death, far from Palestine, is devalued. Thus Kanafani participates, in defying the Palestinians' identity as people of land and waging a great struggle against the "historical myth" which calls that "Palestine was a land without people for a people without land". This was the justification hailed by the colonial British Empire and the Zionist lobbies, to establish a Jewish colony in Palestine. Hence, according to Kanafani, the relationship with the land should be maintained all the time, to defy any "cultural siege". Any effort to forget it or any move on the opposite direction will collapse in tragic failure. Thus, Kanafani relates the struggles he wages through literature with the national struggle of Palestinians to reclaim their homeland.

The treatment of the novel of Palestinian time and space, hence, is adjusted to convey this message, which is obviously clear in the novel. The "men in the sun" dreamed of alternative future and unreal space - a space where they will fulfill their ambitions, out of their homeland. The hundred and fifty kilometers between Basra and Kuwait, for them are a space, which leads to failure. Abul Khaizuran puts it in his words, "Just imagine! In my own mind I compare these hundred and fifty kilometers to the path that God in the Qur'an promised his creatures they must cross before being directed either to Paradise or to Hell. If anyone falls he goes to Hell, and if anyone crosses safely he reaches Paradise. Here the angels are the frontier guards" (Kanafani, 1999, p. 29). And at last the desert became their grave. They were ambitious, and preferred personal prosperity to the national interest. Hence they were trapped in the burning heat of the water tank. The desert was full of fatal signs. Their dreams were fated to die with them in the scorching heat of the sun. Another novel published just after this, *All That is Left to You* (Ma Tabaqqa Lakum), in contrary to the *Men in the Sun*, uses the symbols of Palestinian land, space and time positively. The desert in the novel is kind enough to protagonist, Hamid since his movements were towards the land and his mother. Even as dead bodies they were humiliated. They were throne to the garbage, somewhere in the desert. This unnoticed death, without an identity is a result of their self-centered ambitions of personal security. Here, individualism is portrayed as the antithesis of nationalism. Through this image, Kanafani seemed to be articulating his vision of the Palestinian national movement. According to him, all the revolutionary movements should set forth for the sole direction, towards Palestine. Also, at the same time, he applauds the heroic attempts made by Palestinians.

The Palestinian hero moves between new geographies of the struggle. He bears with him Palestinian victory, loss, happiness and sorrow. All along the history, there were many such heroes. They outlived, after their heroic fall, in the minds of the people. Ustaz Salim in the novel is a hero. But then he couldn't survive much. In the world of Abu Qais:

It is true that the men were too busy to bury you and honour you in your death. But all the same you stayed there. You saved yourself humiliation and wretchedness, and you preserved your old age from shame. The mercy of God be upon you, Ustaz Salim. (1999, p. 10)

Abu Qais recalls his son's schoolteacher, Ustaz Salim. Here Kanafani radically challenges the dominant authority of the traditional leaders and the cultural and political institutions they represent. He seems to be suggesting that the traditional leadership of Palestine, the imams, like the heads of the family and the nobles of the clan, must give way to a new organization, and a new generation. Only then should the revolution come true and successful. In his later writings, both narrative and journalistic, he manipulates to figure out further ideologies for such a movement. It is often in the novel, that either a child or a youngster introduces discrepancy and play the role of an intellectual, who sometimes challenges the familial authorities and raises question about faults. It is young Sa'd who forces Abu Qais to end up the ten years long futile dreams:

There are no trees in Kuwait, Sa'd said so. You must believe Sa'd, because he knows more than you, although he is younger than you. All of them know more than you all of them. (1999, p. 12)

All these reveal Kanafani's interest in a nascent Palestinian resistance movement. While he wrote the story, there was no any political organization solely formed by Palestinians. And the traditional Palestinian and Arab leadership, which has been emasculated in 1948, cannot do anything for them. Like Abul Khaizuran, their personal despair and moral weakness had corrupted them. Abul Khaizuran bargains over rates with "men of the sun". Once they are dead, he avails him of their wristwatches and takes money from their pockets. The leadership is like Abul

Khaizuran, who believes that he is doing a service to the others, by smuggling those unfortunates to Kuwait. The impotent and passive leaders are also made to believe that these illegal businesses, which provide them a part of the profit, are the best of sacrifices they do for Palestinians (Kilpatrick, 1999, p. 11). Their capitalist ambitions are portrayed through Hajj Rida. Hajj Rida, who owns the truck and many professional smugglers in Basra, who over charges their clients and refuse to guarantee their journey, exemplifies the Arab leaders and regimes who, all the while pretend to support the Palestinians in their struggle to secure their national future. They, in fact, exploit them for their own opportunistic ends. In short, Abul Khaizuran and Hajj Rida represent the unsympathetic Arab authorities, by whom Palestinians were betrayed.

According to an allegorical reading, the novel is an attack on the corruption of the Arab regimes in particular and Muslim countries in general which still could do hardly anything to get the Palestinians out of the suffocating airless marginal world of the refugee camps. It is as if the Arab officialdom, who created the Palestinian Diaspora wants to perpetuate it for their interest, if Palestinians don't beat the walls of the refugee camps. As long as they don't bang they won't be set free. The emasculated authorities are justified if they don't do so. And Palestinian issue will remain to be exploited like "Uthman's shirt". Ironically for Israel, the shirt should be kept without being worn out, so as to get its favors from the West forever. In other words, Kanafani thought of Arab officialdom, as perpetrators of the problems. In addition, the Arab impotency, the Palestinian passivity, their overdependence on Arabs or external forces and their search for personal security worsen the situation. Hypocrisy of "the international community" towards Palestinians and mercantile mentality of Muslim rulers have kept the problem unresolved.

The novel, as an organic whole, participates in the political war, or resistance struggle as it seeks the reader for a critical assessment of the concrete possibilities within historically determined circumstances. It resists against the sordid situations in the camps. It also evidently encourages the reader to engage in the persistent struggle against the imperialistic interests of Israel, who is uprooting and destroying a whole culture and distorting the very established history, trying to establish certain myths. The contextual relevance of the novels and its participation in the history of the resistance struggle is further confirmed when we see the question pending at the end of it. This allegorical interpretation is not made for the purpose of the discussion of resistance ingredients in the novel, but taking into consideration the fact that Kanafani was involved in a historical project, a critical interpretation of the question, "Why didn't they bang on the walls of the truck?" The question is reverberated by the desert, "Why didn't they ... why, why..." alludes to Kanafani's visions about the creation of an authority among themselves to take care of their own affairs, both internal strife and control external exploitation. It represents the disavowal of careless leadership of its responsibility. What is ironic here is, the officers at the Mutlaa checkpoint were teasing Abu Khaizuran, who is a eunuch, for relationship with belly dancers in Iraq. They even invited him for a drink in air-conditioned office while their fellow brothers were suffering in the scorching heat of the sun at mid noon. This clarifies Kanafani's stand towards fellow Arab officials and carries to his

criticism of their attitude towards the Palestinians. They are just careless of the issue and for them, as it mentioned earlier, it is a device to get their favours approved from the authority. Banging on the tank in which three Palestinians were choked to death because of their inactivity symbolically suggests the need for revolutionary movement for Palestinians.

The question remains as the major question in the whole course of Kanafani's life and determines his movement in the direction of Palestine. It also determines the main theme of the novel. For fear of drawing attention of the outside world to their existence to the tank where they were hidden, they didn't bang on the wall. An in- depth scrutiny of the question would enable the interpretation of it as Kanafani's voice(al-Mansur, 1972, p. 220). Accordingly, banging on the wall means challenging the historical pressures, and political tenets of patriarchal authority. Palestinians were entrapped in a cultural siege. They have been portrayed by the enemy as scapegoat of certain stereotypes. Internally, they were blocked to be impotent. Thus telling their story, Kanafani is attempting to create such a place for Palestinians, through which they can attain their dreams. Though, it assumed the shape by the creation of Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, he was not satisfied with its nature. He always subscribed to the revolutionary movements and insisted that the movement should proceed towards a right direction. This may be because he learned "the story from the beginning to the end". In other words, Kanafani started a historical project by the novel. His later dissatisfaction - which was further brought to light through many other literary, journalistic, historical and political works - with PLO, which was mainly built by the Arab League to prevent the emergence of any independent or autonomous Palestinian resistance organization, points out towards the historical project, that Kanafani launched with the novel. As is evident today, for him the creation of PLO was not a move towards the solution and alleviation of the suffering of Palestinians. The later formation of PFLP, and Fatah's takeover of the PLO administration after the 1967 war, the extermination of Palestinians from their territories by neighboring Arab countries testifies to the success of political visions. Of course, he was not the only person who promoted the ideas. But he is among many others, who cursed publicly the ignorance of Palestinians and their blind political subjection and dared the tenets of patriarchal authority. This also adds to the claim of Barbara Harlow that the resistance literature is a politicized activity by itself (1987, p. 28).

In terms of literary value, the novel was written in a poetic style. It is rich with symbolism. The tank, sun, desert, rats, death e.t.c. can be read symbolically and literally as well. The huge water tank, in which three generations of Palestinians are forced to die, stands for the camps, where Palestinians are fated to suffer and the gloomy ending refers to the end of the Palestinian people. Trees are a particularly effective reminder of the attachment of these peasants to their land, and the olive tree is especially rich in symbolism. Death, once it is used as a symbol of virility as well as impotency. Death was chosen by the hero of the novel, not for individualistic reason, but in order to further the struggle of his people, where as 'men in the sun' were forced to die for they were ambitious. This illustrates Kanafani's attitude towards self-sacrifice, within the context of revolutionary action. According to him it is an expression of the very highest understanding of life. The love of life for a person becomes a love for the life of his people's masses, and his rejection that their life persists in being full of continuous misery, suffering and hardship (Kilpatrick, 1999, pp. 14-15).

In one way or other, it uses several aspects of modernist narrative techniques like flashback and streams of consciousness. With the novel, Kanafani began to propose alternative forms and outline new narrative possibilities. Rather than transferring experiences directly from reality, he worked to give it a more profound, universal meaning. Children's loss of innocence, youths annoying pessimism stands as universal symbols in the novel. More to the point, the novel, raises the abject Palestinians suffering as a symbol for universal suffering of human being. Kanafani's successful adaptation of the narrative techniques of the western psychological novel, especially as practiced by William Faulkner, to the specifically Palestinian subject matter is projected in the novel. The psychological motivation of the characters has been sketched using the third-person omniscient narration to stream of consciousness and interior monologue. Phrases like "Oh! God of devil" found in the novel should be read as part of this. This also points towards the poor religious background of the period which might have been resulted from the poor level of literacy as well as lack of religious awareness in the war condition. Should the novel mirror social realism, Kanafani shouldn't be criticized for the poor religious ascription. The allegorical reading of the novel elevates the organic symbolical meaning of the novel. Referring to Men in the Sun (1963) Edward Said writes:

Kanafani's very sentences express instability and fluctuation - the present tense is subject to echoes from the past, verbs of sight give way to verbs of sound or smell, and one sense interweaves with another - in an effort to defend against the harsh present and to protect some particularly cherished fragment of the past. (1986, p. 38)

The novel specifically focuses on the Palestinian issue, to the extent that few critics suggest that it lessens its power as a novel. According to Fadl al-Naqib, Kanafani's friend and critic, the successful reputation of the novella is not really because of the narrative techniques he use, but is just because it reveals the secrets of each four Palestinians, which makes the story so realistic. To situate the literary text to the events of upheaval gives the story and its criticism a new significance, especially when the resistance literature is taken into consideration (Fadl al-Naqib, 1972, p. 195). Moreover, the main characters in the novel act as universal symbols of human suffering and destitution of families, for which Palestinians' dilemma is a prototype. In short, the duality of Palestinians' psychological and political exile has been projected by Kanafani's new narrative invention. Hardly any reference to Israel or Jew is made in the novel. It is almost as if he has accepted the indifference of the Arabs and the humane world at large to the issue as well as the passivity and over dependence of Palestinians on the fellow Arabs which really matter to him.

SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

Kanafani's first novel, *Men in the Sun* raises the issue of the Palestinian suffering as a universal symbol of human suffering, while cursing the impotent passivity of Palestinians in the refugee camps. Kanafani's criticism of exploitive response of the Arab authorities to the issue, his proposal for a new responsible Palestinian authority, his directives on its movement etc., determine the novel's involvement in the liberation struggle as a political activity. The settings and plot of the novel revolve around Palestinian land, hero and time and space which determine its role in resisting against certain "historical myths" established by the Zionist propaganda. Incorporating many modern techniques in the novel, Kanafani has not only assured the narrative's participation in the resistance history of Palestinian struggle, but also introduced a new kind of narrative writing.