

Dream, Desert and Destiny: A Critical Evaluation of Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*

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“Imperialism has laid its body over the world, the head in Eastern Asia, the heart in the Middle East, its arteries reaching Africa and Latin America. Wherever you strike it, you damage it, and you serve the World Revolution” - Ghassan Kanafani

Palestinian literature of the past and present, undoubtedly, advocates the issues of protest, self-determination and political freedom as there has been continuous outcry against a forced occupation. Kanafani's verve for literature and quest for seeking political freedom for Palestine through activism and his creative writing establishes him as a key leader and writer in ever troubled Palestinian territories. *Men in the Sun* is a novella that depicts struggle of three characters of the refugee camp who decide to cross a fully patrolled border, unfortunately, meet a tragic end as they die of suffocation in a tanker. Their desire for a better livelihood and freedom from the refugee camp to Kuwait turns into a disaster. Could they have been a role model for their own people had they sacrificed their lives for fighting for freedom? How are refugees treated in the camps and how do young men look at the bleak future? What are certain psychological and political factors that influence the characters either for self-determination or damnation? The paper is an endeavour to answer these questions and also examines how a politically troubled state looks for the long awaited freedom.

The reality of the characters in *Men in the Sun*, the natural dialogues, and the details

make all the characters easily identifiable to most Palestinian readers; talking about events most Palestinians have experienced. It is only the shocking end, however, which has a fable like, almost dystopian, quality to it. When three men trying to escape to a better life, suffocate to death, while being crammed inside an empty tank left under a blazing desert sun; it suddenly transcends the limits of realistic narration, and becomes a symbol of man's mostly thwarted desires of safety, peace, comfort in a world torn apart by strife based on a suspicion for 'difference'-whether racial, ethnic, religious or gender-based.

Fanon writes in *A Dying Colonialism*:

“The colonized person, who in this respect is like the man in underdeveloped countries or the disinherited in all parts of the world, perceives life not as a flowering or a development of an essential productiveness, but as a permanent struggle against an omnipresent death” (12).

This is a good starting point to enter into Kanafani's novella and into the minds of the three men, Assad, Marwan and the elderly Abu Qais, trying to understand the desperation and misery which dictates their actions and choices, or lack of it. As Fanon also points out in the above mentioned book:

The essence of revolution is not the struggle for bread; it is the struggle for human dignity. Certainly this includes bread. And at the base of any revolutionary situation are economic conditions. But beyond a certain point of development, on this same basis, it is more important for a people to have guns in hand than to eat more than the year before (12).

Kanafani embodies the Palestinian “tragedy” and “realism” through his explorations of the darkest hour in Palestinian history, the *Nakba* (catastrophe, 1948-1967), in his works of literature. He is the voice of the oppressed nation. Kanafani’s major theme in his works is the love for his homeland, Palestine. He believed that one’s homeland is central to one’s identity; and the act of leaving one’s homeland was tantamount to losing the most basic part of one’s self. The desire to preserve the Palestinian identity through his writing becomes very clear in his novel *Men in the Sun*. This identity is the past, the present and the future. Kanafani embodied this in his novels and short stories. This is confirmed by Edward Said in his book *The Question of Palestine*. Said says: “Along with Kanafani’s work, Habibi sketches the complete picture of Palestinian identity as no purely political tract can. Both writers record the Kafkaesque alternation between being and not being *there* for Palestinians, whether inside Israel or in the Arab world” (153).

Kanafani condemned selfish emphasis on ‘individuality’ in fellow Palestinians and rather, calls for community achievements. As Hilary Kilpatrick notes in her article, “Ghassan Kanafani’s life provided a supreme example of commitment to a cause; indeed it was for that he died” (15).

Kanafani was so close to his common people who live in refugee camps, he was forced to live in exile. Most of the characters of his novels and short stories are commoners-peasants, farmers and the like, which led to a wide readership of his works. Kanafani’s works are the mirrors of the Palestinians’ life in camps.

Despite fighting hunger, disease, oppression, and poverty, every day, the Palestinians never give up claiming their rights in various ways either by armed struggle or through literary production that reveals the truth of this suffering to the world. This was the biggest task of the Palestinian intellectuals who lived this period of time such as the writer, thinker and poet Fawaz Turki and no one better than him can describe the life in the camps and asylum as he himself experienced this life. He says in his book *The Disinherited: Journal of a Palestinian Exile* 1978 “A few years later, we were still in that refugee camp on the outskirts of Beirut where life was becoming harder and existence becoming more futile” (10). Turki was so much indignant toward the other Arab nations where he experienced racial discrimination though the Palestinians are also Arab. He says:

If I was not a Palestinian when I left Hifa as a child, I am one now. Living in Beirut as a stateless person for most of my growing up years, many of them in refugee camp. I did not feel I was living among my “Arab brothers”. I did not feel I was an Arab,...I was a Palestinian. And that meant I was an outsider, alien, a refugee and a burden (8).

Kanafani too captures, in his novels the suffering of displacement, exile and asylum. In his novella *Umm Sa’ad* (1969), for example, he tells the story of how a Palestinian mother who lives in a camp,

gave up her sons to join the *Fedayeen* (guerrillas) to struggle against the Zionists, who were the main cause of her unhappiness, dispersion and the destruction of her family, till the Liberation of Palestine. Kanafani employed the scene of the Palestinians suffering in his novel *Men in the Sun* through the three characters; Abu Qais, Assad and Marwan and the way they meet a horrific end. Barbara Harlow talks in her book *After Lives: Legacies of Revolutionary Writing* (1996) about "... not only the dispossession of refugee life but also a broken and disrupted family tradition" (Harlow 51). It becomes so clear that tragedy of Palestinians is not only in the camp. Escapism is not an option, according to this author, for he believed that escape from life in the camp would only bring forth other tragedies, like having to live in exile or, even worse, a painful, perhaps ignominious death as suffered by the three characters in *Men in the Sun*. Unfortunately, poverty, hunger and gloom are not the only things that the Palestinians unfortunate enough to have to live in these camps, have to face. The *Men in the Sun* (1963) was Kanafani's first foray into this genre. The main themes of the novel are about displacement and death, the reflection of the Palestinian catastrophe that occurred in 1948 and its impact on the Palestinian people. The action unfolds through the narrations of four Palestinian men of different generations who tell their story in a wonderful symbolic technique.

The novel is a very symbolically rich treatment of the situation of the Palestinians after the *Nakba*. The novelist reflected the issue through the characters, as each character in the novel symbolizes a certain personality of his people. The story

is about three men who decide to emigrate from Palestine to Kuwait illegally to improve their living conditions. A man called Abul Khaizuran who is a Palestinian working on a truck with a water tank fixed on it, offers to take them to Kuwait. They must hide in the tank until they reach the border points. The novel ends with the death of the three men suffocating inside the tank when left out in the blazing desert sun for too long, because they did not dare to knock the walls of the tank in spite of tremendous discomfort, for fear of being found out.

In the novel *Men in the Sun*, there are four main characters: The first character is Abul Khaizuran, who was a symbol of the Palestinian leadership unable to protect his people, and he is the smuggler who offered to transport them from Iraq to Kuwait by crossing the borders for a sum of money. The writer depicts the figure of Abul Khaizuran as an opportunistic leadership that does not care about the fate of his people. But he cares only in fulfilling his personal desires and benefits. As for the three men, the first person is Abu Qais, an old man belonging to a bygone era, who decided to emigrate to earn some money for himself and his children and to buy olive trees to replace the ones he lost. The second character is Assad, a political person and a fighter fleeing the country to get more freedom. He is the figure of the Palestinian pursuer. The third character is Marwan, the sole breadwinner of his family, who decides to emigrate to Kuwait for better life and to support his family.

Men in the Sun has been subjected to critical studies from the multi-directional and critical theories and these critical lessons have often reached completely contradictory results. Critics have found features of realism, and socialism in

particular, on the one hand, and romanticism on the other. But the dominant trend in the novel is the symbolic approach used to indicate the Palestinian people and their leaders and Arab leaders. The time of writing this novel and its location requires the writer to take the symbolic direction as required by realism. Kanafani employs the symbolism to get the realism.

The most haunting symbol of the story is undoubtedly its harrowing ending, where three men willfully embrace death instead of knocking on the walls of the tank, which turns from hiding place to grave, to ask to be let out. As these three men died of suffocation in the tank, their inability or unwillingness to knock for help symbolizes the level of fear that the Palestinians live in. Freedom of expression, even the most basic and legitimate right of screaming for one's life is missing. The Palestinian people, who suffered from displacement, never thought of confronting this painful situation. In the novel, Kanafani condemns all the parties that caused the tragedy of Palestinians, the defeated Palestinian leadership, the surrendering people, and all those who abandoned their land in search of salvation. This is chillingly captured in the closing lines of the novel:

Why didn't you knock on the sides of the tank?

Why didn't you say anything? Why?

The desert suddenly began to send back the echo:

Why didn't you knock on the sides of the tank?

Why didn't you bang the sides of the tank? Why? Why? Why? (74).

The Jordanian critic Yousif Sami Al-Yusuf has pointed out the irrationality of the tragedy that this situation represents. He

raises the very pertinent question as to why should we accept to die as cowards and willingly walk into a ready-made grave (Al-Yusuf 19). Al-Yusuf's contention here is that no situation is so desperate, and the Palestinians should not have agreed to be put in the tank (which represents the grave) and accept to die like chicken. They should have resisted and fought for their right of existence and self-determination like other nations without any racial discrimination.

The critic, Dr. Nidal Al-Saleh has noted features of the three trends of realism, romance and symbolism in this novel. In his book, *The Case of the Land in the Palestinian-Arab Novel*, he describes *Men in the Sun* as a combination of three artistic strands- Realistic, Symbolic and Romantic. He feels that these trends are manifested through the relationship of its characters with two main elements: the land on the one hand, and the dream of individual salvation on the other. The relationship of Abu Qais, for example, shows not only nostalgia of the romantic personality, but also its inability to adapt to reality of pleasure interests. The second element is in keeping with the romantic desire to portray the experience of the individual who stands alone in the face of the world or the memories of this individual about the glorious past of the homeland as a consolation to tolerate the present and not otherwise. Deliberately, Kanafani condemns the characters more and to say that the dream of these characters for salvation from the reality did not exceed their individualities, and therefore is doomed to failure, trapped within the walls of alienation of self (Al-Saleh 23).

What can be understood from the critic's point is that Kanafani condemns the

individual salvation which leads to ultimate passive end and escaping from reality. Moreover, the image of romanticism here is the land and the level of love that ties the Palestinians with their land. There are so many symbols through the novel such as the desert which symbolizes death, human torture and suffering. It is manifested in the novel when Abul Khaizuran says to the three characters through the journey in the desert by crossing the borders, "This is the Hell that I have heard of." "God's Hell?" "Yes" (Kanafani 65).

The critic and the great author, Ihsan Abass, wonders why Kanafani made the figure of Abul Khaizuran lose his sexual ability which was due to the struggle in Palestine, in his article entitled "The Symbolic Voice in the Stories of Ghassan". As he points out, the violence of the events of 1948 were such that Abul Khaizuran's loss seems very feasible. And Abass further goes on to point out how the emasculated Abul Khaizuran becomes a stand-in for the helpless and cursed political leaders who still claimed to be able to "guide" the Palestinians and "save them" (Abass 17-18).

The critic lamented how Palestinian people still put their faith on such helpless leaders. When Kanafani deliberately made Abul Khaizuran lose his sexual ability, in the Arab culture this signified a loss of his manhood and power; most importantly a loss of his ability to bring forth new life into this world. And a man who is thus rendered impotent automatically becomes a symbol for the ineffectual political leaders who are unable to properly lead a nation, or to usher in a new dawn in the fragmented Arab world. Kanafani aesthetically employed the symbolic technique to expose the actual reality of

the Palestinians' pain. This pain is not only from the occupiers or the incapable Palestinian leaders but also from some other Arab countries' leaders. As the Lebanese writer and the critic Sami Suwaidan describes, the Arab border officers also have a role in killing the three Palestinians; because they are the real reason for the entry of the Palestinians into the tank, which caused their death. They (the border officers), are the ones who have increased the period of the time the three Palestinians have to stay under the heat of the deadly sun. This is a symbol of the role of the Arab nations in the narrative to contribute to the ultimate death of the Palestinians. As they provide the conditions for this expected death (Suwaidan 111).

The paper further focuses on the narratives of *Men in the Sun* and how Kanafani was able to clarify this matter in a technical way and send a clear message about why there is discrimination between the Arab brothers. If the Palestinian Arabs are like the rest of the Arab nationals, then these harassments become very difficult to justify morally. This was originally made by the colonial countries and it is a policy of the English colonial country, "divide and rule" and why this division and frustration among the brotherly countries. It is the colonial occupation which practices all types of repression, displacement, dislocation, banishment and exile to the people who were already isolated by the British mandate and nothing is in hands of Palestinians. Kanafani rejects all forms of racism and racial discrimination in his novel either it is said directly or indirectly in the context. According to Kanafani the race which deserves to be respected and appreciated which has motivation and clinging to his

land and homeland no matter what religion or race or belief. As what happen to Ustaz Selim (teacher Selim) who comes from Jaffa a well developed Palestinian city to a village to teach the boys there. Ustaz Selim spent several years in teaching in this village and he is highly respected man. On one night in the headman's reception room someone asked him:

"... and you will lead the prayers on Friday, won't you?"

"No, I'm a teacher, not an imam. I can't lead the prayers."

The headman said to him:

"What's the difference? Our teacher was an imam."

"He was a teacher in Quran school, but I teach in secular school."

The headman repeated his question, insistently:

"What's the difference?" ... everyone was confused about this, like the headman. ..., Ustaz Selim cleared his throat and said quietly:

"Well, I don't know how to perform the prayers."

"You don't know?"

There were growls from everyone, but Ustaz Selim reaffirmed what he had said:

"I don't know..." He burst out without thinking:

"And what do you know, then?"... he answered quickly, as he was rising:

"Many things. I'm a good shot, for instance..."

"if they attack you, wake me; I may be of some use" (22-23).

This excerpt shows that Kanafani was against any discrimination, whether racial, religious or class-based, or any other faction. For this reason, he did not mention the religion of Ustaz Salim. In the Palestinian culture, the teacher is highly

respected by the public and so in honor of his education, the Headman asks him for leading Friday prayers but he does not accept this request. This refusal by Ustaz Salim, makes everyone surprised from the negative response towards the Headman. This is an indication that Kanafani does not bother of race, and he strongly condemns the racial discrimination. He esteems those who die to make their homeland live as what exactly Ustaz Salim does. Here is the comparison between the Imam who left the payers and Ustaz Salim who dies for his land and his people. In this regard, Kanafani's message is that Palestinians must be united and ignore the racial discrimination or sect issues.

Kanafani has another message to those who were martyred in defending their land from the occupiers. God awards those souls to rest in their Holy Land and not to be buried in the exile, and this gift is particularly to those heroes who sacrificed their lives in defending their Holy Land. As Abu Qais says, "... God was certainly good to you when he made you die one night before the wretched village fell into the hand of the Jews. One night only. O God, is there any divine favor greater than that?"(23).

Kanafani was able to demonstrate the extent to which the borders, demarcated by the colonizers, increased the suffering of the Palestinian people. People belonging to the same race; same religion, speaking the same language, have been put on different sides of fences and wires and told that they belong to different nations. Many of them share the same traditions and culture; and yet, ironically, these borders are closed for fellow Arabs (Palestinians) while they are opened to the colonizers. This becomes clear through Assad's journey from Jordan to Iraq, and how Abul-Abd brings him

down before the Iraqi border and tells him “You’ve only got to go round H4” (29). He means to cross long distance in the desert. As he claims he will be waiting on the road. In fact these are all lies. A natural question that arises is what would be the repercussions if he crosses the border through the check point? The answer is cleared as Abul-Abd says “They’ll take me to prison if they catch you with me” (29). This kind of punishment he will get because he is taking a Palestinian with him. Another kind of punishment as Abul-Abd says while he is arguing with Assad “What do you think will happen? Your name is registered at all the frontier posts. If they see you with me now...a plotter against the state, what do you think will happen?” it is the fear of such punishments that make the Palestinians opt to cross a hellish desert, walking for miles rather than approach the check-points. This is also the major theme; Kanafani shows those who left their homeland will get the punishment of man as well as nature. As Assad describes his walking journey in the desert “If they had taken me to the desert prison, Al-Jafr, at H4, I wonder if life would have been kinder than it is now. Pointless, pointless,...”(31).

On the other hand, colonizers are free to travel anywhere they like with no barriers. Moreover, in some cases the foreigners are more sympathetic toward the Palestinians than the brotherly countries. This happened to Assad while he was crossing the borders between Jordan and Iraq. The one who was supposed to take him to Iraq abandoned and fooled him, but a foreigner couple who could cross the frontier easily and freely, gave Assad a lift: “They had picked him up a little after sunset, after he had waved to them in their small car...He was trembling from extreme cold” (34).

Kanafani has another vision in this episode. It shows that these foreigners, who belong to a different race and culture, do not speak Arabic, and are on the surface completely different from us, what they do for Assad is much more than those who can be called brothers. The humanity and kindness of these foreigners is lost among us and we are from the same race and culture. Kanafani criticizes the blackmailing, injustice and racial discrimination that fall on the Palestinians. He portrayed this through a powerful and poignant symbol, when the foreign lady asked about the rats “Oh. This desert is full of rats. What on earth do they eat? He answered quietly: Rats smaller than them” (35). These big rats represent the smugglers like the fat man in Iraq who extort the weak and the refugees furthermore they are devoid of humanity, morality and brotherly spirit. They are greedy of money and do not care what way do they get it. Even, if it costs the life of others. Riyad Ahmad Mahmoud, in his article “The Symbolic and Chronological Narrative in the Novel *Men in the Sun*”, while reflecting on how this general tragedy of the Palestinian citizens finds symbolic expression in Kanafani’s novel, laments that the Palestinians are the easy prey for those who have big bellies that is these smugglers (Mahmoud 10).

Kanafani once again condemns the borders which are symbols of racial segregation. This is a kind of separation between brothers and these borders are worse than the occupation. These are the main cause of the Palestinian tragedy in particular and the source of the Arab tragedy in general. Kanafani shows this through Abu Baqir, one of the minor characters who is part of the Kuwaiti frontier police. As the critic Dr. Mohammed Fouad Sultan says in his

critical study on *Men in the Sun*, the Borders and Customs officer Abu Baqir is the symbol of the corrupt and irresponsible Arab bureaucrat who is busy in silly things, preoccupied with trivialities and exploitation” (Sultan 16). Sultan also criticizes the Iraqi smugglers who represent the Arab leaders. He emphasizes that the smuggler Al-Basrawi is the symbol of human exploitation in the worst form, the symbol of the Arab (particularly Palestinian) leaderships, and the symbol of the class of politicians and capitalist bourgeoisies who exploit Palestinians for personal benefit and trafficking; and argues that, along with Zionist fanaticism, a lot of the responsibility of the Palestinians’ tragedy lies with the indifferent and corrupt power centres in their own country (16).

The question arises, why did the writer make Abul Khaizuran to create relations with the Iraqi and Kuwaiti border police? Perhaps this is related to the reality of the story, which reflects the reality of the Arab man, who aims to fabricate such relations with men from the border to conduct his affairs, especially among the drivers who frequently cross these borders. However, Kanafani may have another goal, perhaps he wanted to reveal what is in these officers of the border police. They engage themselves in contradictions, and are preoccupied with the trivialities, which are

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the causes of the real crisis that leads to the intensification of the Palestinian people’s tragedy, the displacement of the Palestinians, and their suffering. This is the story of the Arab nation’s leaders who contributed in one way or another to the catastrophe of Palestine as they continue practicing the racial segregation which they inherited from the colonizers. This is exactly the manifestation of the reality of the Arab leaders as symbolized by the border police personnel in the novel under discussion.

The novel *Men in the Sun* revolves around the two themes, psychological love and physical love towards one’s land; since the land gives the value of existence, the identity and entity, Kanafani has succeeded in expressing these themes through the major character Abu Qais who says in an interior monologue “ ...For ten years you have been hoping to return to the ten olive trees that you once owned in your village. Your Village! Ha!” (Kanafani 27). This is the psychological love to his land which becomes dream for him and nostalgia of returning to his occupied land. But physical love is missing from Abu Qais since he abandoned his country (though unwillingly), but it exists in Ustaz Salim who died for his land. This is the physical love that Kanafani wants from each Palestinian, to sacrifice and struggle for his land.