



The Symbolism of the Sun in Ghassan Kanafani's Fiction: A Political Critique

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Abstract

This article explores the symbolism of the sun in Ghassan Kanafani's fiction, in particular his novella *Men in the Sun* (originally written and published in Arabic under the title *Rijal fi al-Shams*). The article argues that the sun is a naturalistic emblem standing for the harsh realities encountered by Palestinian refugees. Hence, it is employed as a political metaphor representing the "hellish" life of exiled Palestinians. In this light, the metaphorical employment of the motif of the sun serves the protest message of Kanafani's postcolonial literature of resistance. It is part of a larger project of employing gritty, harsh realism to depict a wretched world of agony, loneliness, despair, and helplessness. In Kanafani's fiction, the sun directly figures pain, alienation and suffering, rather than hope, light, and renewal as commonly viewed in literary and mythical depictions. Instead of embodying light and birth, the sun figures loss and death in Kanafani's fictional world. Therefore, it gives Kanafani's fiction a mythical dimension when this fiction is viewed in its entirety. At the individual level of singular pieces, the sun underscores the realistic weight of such pieces, adding to their ideological, political and historical value. In *Men in the Sun*, the sun as a dominant symbol functions contra abstract metaphorical language by making the brutal realities of exile and suffering more concrete, more immediate, and more perceptible for the reader. Thus, it is a pessimistic symbol for Kanafani used to create realistic portraits of Palestinian life rather than an optimistic one as traditionally viewed.

Keywords: Symbolism, Resistance Literature, Palestinian Literature, Ecocriticism

1. Introduction

Simply defined, a literary symbol is a word, a character, an object, or an event with a range of references beyond its literal meaning. It can be a word, a group of words, or an expression carrying a meaning or a set of related meanings. According to Chris Baldick, literary language employs symbol as "a specifically evocative kind of image, a word or a phrase referring to a concrete object, scene, or action which also has some further significance associated with it" (1990, pp. 218-219). A symbol stands for and represents something else beyond this symbol. In Kanafani's fiction, the unstated suggestions of the strong presence of the sun acquire particular meanings through the concrete realities of misery and humiliation encountered by the *Men in the Sun* (1962). Thus, Kanafani's language figures perceptible states rather than abstract ones or general ideas or concepts. It uses symbols to augment the effect of the real world of suffering due to being dislocated from one's homeland. And instead of simply standing for pain and suffering at the metaphorical level, the sun in Kanafani's fiction makes misery and wretchedness more immediate for the reader, thus bridging the gap between the symbol and what it stands for. It is the contention of this article that Kanafani's sun symbolism and its range of references are so close to each other, which heightens the political orientation of this carefully selected symbolism.

Literary and mythical depictions of the sun are ambivalent and multiple (Ferber, 1999, pp. 209-210). They range between light and life/birth (Ferber, pp. 209-10), hope and despair, glory and fame, divinity and malevolence, and power and growth. The sun is often seen as a masculine symbol countering the moon as a feminine symbol of change and flux. In popular Greek mythology, Apollo the Sun god has a Moon goddess, Artemis, as a twin sister. In Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), the sun signifies the renewing cycle of life and regeneration against postwar decay and infertility. The epigraph from Ecclesiastes about the abiding earth and cycle of generations "The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to the place where he arose..." (*The Sun Also Rises*, Epigraph). By contrast, sunset signifies death, which makes the sun an eternal symbol for death and rebirth. In Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130," the sun is traditionally warm and bright, but the eyes of the speaker's mistress are apparently the opposite of this good image, being cold and dull: "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; /Coral is far more red than her lips' red;" begins the sonnet ("Sonnet 130", 1609). Robert Louis Stevenson's poem "Summer Sun" makes the sun shed his "warm and glittering look/ Among the ivy's inmost nook" ("Summer Sun", 1885). For ecocritics, the personified sun in this poem is "The gardener of the World" penetrating openings and surfaces and causing happiness for human beings and plants. It is the source of unity between man and nature.

Against this general optimism and positivity in the depiction of the sun, there is an established tradition on negative symbolism. In some of Shakespeare's sonnets, the sun is part of a mutable nature. In "Sonnet 18," for example, the sun is the source of excessive heat and is alternatively at the mercy of clouds: "Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, /

And often is his gold complexion dimm'd" ("Sonnet 18," 1609). In Albert Camus' novel *The Stranger* (1942; trans. 1946), the sun is a pernicious, uncontrollable force, blinding the main character, Meursault, and making him—as he claims—commit a murder. In the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus, the sun is a source of death/destruction making the wax melt and thus destroying the wings, which makes Icarus fall down into the sea. In Jean Toomer's story "Blood-Burning Moon," published in *Cane* (1923), it is the moon as a politicized symbol rather the sun that figures the harsh political realities of racism in the American South leading to the mob lynching of a black man. And in Langston Hughes's 1951 poem "Harlem: A Dream Deferred," the sun is associated with dryness, whereby unfulfilled dreams of equality become analogous to a raisin in the sun withering up. As we will see in the next section, Kanafani's employment of the sun is closer to the more pessimistic view of pain, death, and destruction. It is this harsh, cruel tradition of sun symbolism in Kanafani's fiction that this article explores and seeks to justify, arguing through the use of textual analysis for the proximity between Kanafani's symbolic language and the bitter experiences it seeks to communicate to the reader. It is my argument that Kanafani uses the sun imagery and symbolism to directly evoke the concrete political events he opposes and to heighten the ideological impact of his narrative.

2. The Symbolism of the Sun in Kanafani's Fiction

In the world of Kanafani's fiction, the sun is mainly used for a postcolonial end, namely to enhance his realistic depiction of the agonized world of suffering of his characters and their existential dilemmas in exile. The symbolism of the sun fosters Kanafani's gritty realism and the suffering he wants to depict. The scorching heat and dust add to the torment of Kanafani's characters. Kanafani's men are often punished by the fierce summer heat. Since Kanafani's fiction can be read in terms of his "representation of the lives of Palestinians after the *nakba*" and a "preoccupation with the broader Palestinian national struggle" (Al-Madhoon, 2012, para.5-8), the symbolism of the sun is basically and legitimately political, and thus immediate, in nature.

In Kanafani's story a "Letter from Gaza," (1956) the letter writer addresses his friend in America, Mustafa, telling him of his plan to stay in Gaza rather than leave to join him. The writer's niece Nadia has had her leg amputated from the top of the thigh in a Gaza hospital. As the writer leaves the hospital, he experiences "silent derision on the two pounds [of apple he] had brought with [him] to give Nadia" (Kanafani, p.115). The sun in this story embodies the physical pain of the victim and the mental anguish of the witnesses of this pain. In a reminder of the association between the sun, on the one hand, and the blood caused by Israeli bombs, on the other hand, we are told that the blazing sun filled the streets "with the color of blood" (p.115). Feelings of sadness, defeat, and loss overwhelm the letter writer upon leaving the hospital. The amputated leg of Nadia teaches him a lesson about struggle for existence and the need to find one's identity "here among the ugly debris of defeat" (p.115). The linkage between sunlight and traumatic memories of defeat is clear. The narrator says: "I went out into the streets of Gaza, streets filled with blinding sunlight. They told me that Nadia had lost her leg when she threw herself on top of her little brothers and sisters to protect them from the bombs and flames that had fastened their claws into the house. Nadia could have saved herself, she could have run away, rescued her leg. But she didn't" (p. 115). The agency given to the sun by making it fill the streets with blood also makes it a pernicious force of killing and burning. The sun in this story is also an existential symbol of sacrifice and the struggle for survival against great odds. In Kanafani's novella *Returning to Haifa* (1970), the main characters Said and his wife Safeyya return to Haifa after 20 years with bitter memories due to the 1948 loss. As Said drives, he feels the heat of June over his head:

Since he had left Ramallah in the morning, he did not stop talking, and nor did she. The fields were sinking under his eyes through the windscreen. And the heat was unbearable, for he felt as if his forehead were ablaze, exactly like the asphalt burning under his wheels, with the sun over him, that terrible June sun, downpouring its fury on the earth (My translation from Arabic; 2016, p.1)

The sun here represents the misery of loss and dislocation. It is mental anguish and heat experienced within as a result of frustration and deprivation. The sun also augments the traumatic memories of the past that awaken inside the characters with their return to the site of their loss due to Israeli occupation of their homeland. In another Kanafani novel, *What's Left to You* (1966) the desert is a principal character just like the sun. They get personified in an allegory that juxtaposes the loss of family honor against the loss of land. The sun and the desert are politically inseparable for Kanafani. They symbolize loss and death. Hamed's sister, Mariam, gets pregnant out of wedlock by a married man named Zakaria. The hateful sun punishes whoever leaves their land, bearing witness to their death, humiliation, and suffering.

In *The Stolen Shirt and Other Stories*, originally published in the 1950s and 1960s, the story "Until We Return" (1957) begins with the militant hero crossing the Naqab desert and carrying dynamite to blow up an Israeli water tank erected in the land he lost. The story begins this way: "With the sun rays eating his head while he was trudging alone in the Naqab desert, he heard the noise of his thoughts inside his head as if it were a bunch of nails being knocked but never penetrating" (Kanafani, 2016, p.17). Again, the sun here figures the existential loneliness of Kanafani's men resisting oppression and seeking freedom. The sun becomes an objective correlative for what characters feel in terms of defeat and spite against their oppressors. The sun signifies lack of protection. It is being exposed, targeted, and singled out, i.e. victimized.

In a story collection entitled *About Men and Guns*, Kanafani highlights the importance of having a gun to fight the oppressor. The sun figures in two occasions. In the first one, in a story of 1965 entitled "The Young One and His Father and the Gun go to Jeddeen Castle", there is a revolution against the English and an attack on an English castle. As the revolutionaries seek a hiding place with the arrival of English forces, the white scarves flutter, "and the sun disappears

behind dark, black clouds while the sky begins to shower” (Kanafani, 2016, p. 90). It is as if the sun hides to give the retreating men the protection of rain and darkness. As the attack fails and the men retreat, the sky clears again and the sun rises again (95). On another occasion, in a story originally published under the title “The Fedayee” and then “Salman’s Friend Learns Many Things in One Night” (1968), a young man is learning to be a fedayee (i.e. a freedom fighter). He lives in a tent “which was being roasted in a miserable oven of dust” (Kanafani, 2016, p.125). In such stories, the sun is closely linked to the cause of freedom and resistance. It wavers between a cause of wretchedness that should be tolerated and a benevolent force one can take advantage of during the fight for freedom.

In *Umm Saad* (1969), by contrast, the sun acquires positive connotations; this earthly woman belongs to the land, to nature. The novel begins this way: “That morning was miserable. And the sun seemed glowing behind the window as if it were a mere fire ball ablaze under an arc of terrible void” (Kanafani, 2016, p.9). Her son has joined the fedayeen, but she lives in wretched camps. When the sun rays fall on her face while she is sitting inside a room, she seems “strong, and young as ever” (p.31). This time the sun is a source of warmth, regeneration, and resilience in the face of oppression. Umm Saad smiles: “And outside, the sun drove its way across the dark clouds like a plough forcing a furrow in the land, and thrust a bundle of warmth inside the room. Was it by chance that the sun rays fell on her face while she was sitting there? She smiled, and seemed strong and young as ever” (p.31). Therefore, Kanafani’s depiction of the sun is basically ambivalent, weighing more in the negative sense of punishment and suffering and making the sun a mythical symbol underlying most pieces, giving them thematic richness and linking their content to a political context of struggle against occupation. Negative or positive, the representation of the sun is basically ideological and political in nature, making it stand for dispossession on the one hand and resistance on the other. The next section focuses on Kanafani’s most popular and eminent novella, *Men in the Sun*, in particular to explicate the employment of the sun as a political metaphor whereby the sun figures pain and suffering associated with exile not detachedly and sparsely but rather immediately and intensely. As a result, Kanafani’s famous “national allegory” of political deprivation and dislocation successfully utilizes the sun to make the wretchedness it portrays more immediate, more visceral, and more plausible. Within a realistic framework, Kanafani makes the sun his men live under an avenue for objectively depicting the sociopolitical milieu of post-1948 Palestinian exodus.

3. The Symbolism of the Sun in *Men in the Sun*

Scholarship on this novella has not so far adequately examined the symbolism of the sun and its imagery. Nor did critics project the employment of the sun to intensify the interior states of psychological realism in the novel. A quick overview of this scholarship might be relevant here. Critics like Haidar Eid have argued that Kanafani’s fiction confronts reality rather than escapes from it, which enhances the artistic value of this fiction (2013, p.1). Eid discussed the symbolism of the desert, not that of the sun, arguing that it stands for “the stage on which the tragedy of exile is performed: leaving one’s homeland can lead to the desert, where an undignified death awaits” (p.6). Similarly, Hilary Kilpatrick reads the symbolism of the desert, stating that it “represents the ordeal of fire that the Palestinians must pass through, and it is depicted in its starkest guise; its presence contributes to the suspense that is built up as the lorry races along under the boiling August sun” (1999, p.12). In fact, the desert as a literary symbol can signify “freedom of soul and being naked” while fire “is a symbol of purity” (Fadaee, 2011, p.20).

Nadeen Shaker reads the novella as an allegory, a problematic one embodying the “tension between national and non-national or modern allegory” (2015, para. 12) since it can be allegorically read in the light of “the post-1948 Palestinian refugee experience of deracination and attempts to escape it most starkly” (para. 1). It evokes the experience of the lives of residents of refugee camps but not directly as the characters are trying to escape to Kuwait. Moreover, Nasser Abufarha explores how symbols were used to represent the Palestinian identity “by unifying the Palestinian experience across conditions of exile, fragmentation, and isolation” (2008, p.344). Abufarha lists in this anthropological study symbols like cactus, orange, poppy, and olive as national and political symbols of community, loss of land, rootedness, and resistance (p. 346). The sun as a significant symbol is left out in this study.

Using the works of critics like Homi Bhabha, Benedict Anderson, and Edward Said, Yahya Alwadhaf and Noritha Omar (2011) have argued that Kanafani’s novel can be read as an act of narrative resistance aimed at the construction of the story of the Palestinian nation and that nations are created in novelistic discourse. They declared that by depicting “war victims, displaced people, orphan children born and growing up in refugee camps, and women without their men, Kanafani proposes a national narrative of loss, humiliation and exploitation. It is not the narrative of Abu Qais, Assad, Marwan, Shafiq or Abul Khaizuran, but also the narrative of all the Palestinians” (p.117). Barbara Harlow in a study on Kanafani’s novella *Men in the Sun* and Tawfiq Salih’s *The Duped* argues the Palestinian writer is “engaged in the historical project” of writing the story of exodus, exile, and humiliation just as his characters live and negotiate this story (1985, p.102). It is my contention in the following argument that the symbolism of the sun in Kanafani’s fiction and in *Men in the Sun* in particular is deeply rooted in this historical and political context of the story other critics have highlighted. Kanafani juxtaposes a hellish sun outside against the misery of exiled characters within, thus bridging the gap between external realism and psychological realism and making the sun not only stand for in the distant or abstract sense but rather immediately figure, embody, and express what it stands for. In *Men in the Sun*, the heat of August is stifling. The sun is a source of wretchedness and humiliation in the desert of Kuwait. The word “sun” is used about eleven times in the story, which makes it the most dominant symbol in the novella. The related word “desert” is used approximately eight times. Words associated with both symbols like “blaze,” “fire,” “sweat,” “burning,” “heat,” and “hell” are also present in the text. The blazing sky makes the men feel more alien and insignificant in the sheer expansion of the desert. The recurrence of this motif of the “sun” makes it the overriding symbol in the story bringing

together its nuanced themes. The experience of living in an occupied place or being an exile seems to affect language as much as it affects one's psychological makeup. The trauma of dislocation seems to affect, in this case maybe even limit, Kanafani's linguistic choices.

The merciless sun punishing characters is that of a life in exile or under occupation; it is not the same as life in one's country or one's land. The sun also gets to symbolize the wretchedness of refugee camp life in tents. Assad, trying to get to Iraq from Jordan, is tricked by the smuggler. He walks round H4 under a scorching sun expecting to meet the guide beyond that place: "The sun was pouring flame down on his head, and as he climbed the yellow slopes, he felt he was alone in the whole world" (year, p.31). After hours of walking in the desert, "his head was still burning, and he had the feeling that his forehead was dripping blood" (p.32). Just as in "Letter from Gaza" whereby the blazing sun fills the streets with the color of blood, the sun here is associated with blood to indicate defeat and sadness. As the three men began their journey in the lorry, the sun "was pouring its inferno down on them without any respite" (p.52). It is actually the bright sunlight striking the windscreen that makes their driver Abul Khaizuran remember the past injury of losing his manhood while fighting for his country and the "bright round light" of the surgery room: "The light was shining so brightly that at first he could see nothing. But he felt a terrible pain coiled between his thighs" (pp.52- 54). Abul Khaizuran is a traumatized man in Freudian terms. It is the sun that triggers his past trauma. Hence, Kanafani's text employs the symbolism of the sun by linking it to postcolonial trauma. The sun is a source of humiliation and disgrace. But it is also an existential fixity making characters aware of their miserable lives in exile. They constantly feel it in the lorry and inside the water tank they use to get smuggled into Kuwait.

During the journey in the lorry, it is the powerful sun that dominates the scene: "The sun hung high above their heads, round, blazing, and blindingly bright" (p.63). The sun roasts them while they carry their hopes and dreams of a better life for their families. "The sun in the middle of the sky traced a broad dome of white flame over the desert, and the trail of dust reflected an almost blinding glare" (pp.64-65). In a sense, the sun replaces "God" and heightens the existential alienation of such men. When he goes out of the second checking point, Abul Khaizuran "looked at the tank for a moment and he had the impression that the metal was about to melt under that fearful sun" (p.70). When he opens the cover of the water tank to check on the men inside, "A drop of sweat from his forehead fell onto the metal roof of the tank and immediately dried. He put his head on his knees, bent his soaked back until his face was over the black hole, and shouted in a dry, grating voice" (p.71). Such language not only evokes the dire impact of the sun on characters but also makes this impact more felt and discernible for the reader. Kanafani does not only tighten the distance between his dominant symbol and what it stands for, i.e. between his literal and figurative language, but he also heightens our emotional responses as readers of this unfolding tragedy of dislocation and subsequent death.

The sun (along with the desert) acts as the hero of the story even when it is not directly referred to while we see its impact on the lives of characters. The sun intensifies the here and now misery of Kanafani's men and simultaneously makes them remember their traumatic past and repressed agony: "This desert was like a giant in hiding, flogging their heads with whips of fire and boiling pitch. But could the sun kill them and all the stench imprisoned in their breasts?" (p.65). The sun here functions through the desert, manipulating the minds and reality of characters. It transforms the conventional national allegory Kanafani wrote about three Palestinian refugees seeking financial security in life after being expelled from their homelands, making it more realistic and more evocative. In other words, the men in the sun do stand for different generations of Palestinians whose lives have been impacted by the loss of their land, but Kanafani employs the symbolism and imagery of the sun to make his political message more directly effective and to maintain the ideological orientation of his resistance literature.

Ultimately, the sun triumphs over the men. As for the dead bodies inside the water tank, one is "cold and still" with "damp gray hair" (p.71). Another body is still holding on to the metal support inside the tank with a mouth widely open (p.72). In this unfolding drama with "gothic" elements, Abul Khaizuran sweats and trembles, but "he couldn't tell whether he was trembling because of this oil covering his chest and back or whether it was caused by fear" because the "merciless sun" kills them (p.71). It is the sun that causes the exiled characters to sweat, feel stifled, and ultimately die. The realistic, and even ugly, details of this gruesome death inside a sweltering tank at the end of the story make this symbolic function of the sun very close to the thematic end of the story which is an exposition of the wretched life conditions of exiles and a rejection of their evasive search for dignity outside their occupied homeland. The corpses that Abul Khaizuran disposes of in the desert by throwing them on a trash heap make the symbolism of the sun more immediate to the reader, arousing in some cases a sense of revulsion. If the sun depicts the real in terms of pain, suffering, and death, Kanafani makes us encounter the effect of the real upfront—thus making the sun embody what it stands for in this novella. This lack of distance between Kanafani's sun symbolism and the concrete realities called up by this symbolism testifies to Kanafani's unconventionally committed and politically relevant fiction.

4. Conclusion

This shocking end of suffocating inside a water tank in very hot weather makes us feel sad for the characters, and this sympathy is justified by the horrible end they meet in a burning desert. The ending of the story is repulsive for many readers and critics. For example, Allen Webb has argued that *Men in the Sun* is "a disturbing tale of four Palestinian refugees seeking work in Kuwait" (2009, p.82). Another critic has described the end of *Men in the Sun* as "unceremonious" one symbolizing the "dehumanization and worthlessness" of the refugees (Gomaa & Raymond, 2014, p. 35). Thus, Kanafani uses the sun for a political end: to express the pain and suffering of the Palestinian people away from their homeland. He uses death, poverty, a hostile environment, and humiliation to concretely depict the agony of his characters. The suffering caused by the sun (external realism) becomes very close to the mental anguish (interior

realism) characters experience as a result of a traumatic past and a bitter present. Against a literary tradition that links the sun with life and hope for a new beginning, Kanafani employs the sun alternatively to directly communicate an experience of death and suffering in political exile.

This careful selection of a harsh setting consisting of desert and blazing sun foregrounds the adversities against which his displaced men fend off, making his objective narration more realistic and more emotionally appealing. Therefore, this article has examined the symbolism of the sun in Kanafani's fiction, focusing on his novella *Men in the Sun* by way of highlighting the historical, political, and pessimistic nature of this symbolism meant to evoke the harsh realities of exile and political oppression while simultaneously arousing our sympathy for his characters despite this matter of fact depiction of men under the sun. Kanafani uses the symbolism of the sun not to widen our imagination (as traditional literary symbols are expected to do) but rather to make us feel the misery of his men in the sun.

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