

The Diasporic Narrative: Identity Crisis in Ghasan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*

Raed Ali Alsaoud Alqasass*

Taibah University, Madinah, Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: Raed Ali Alsaoud Alqasass, E-mail: rqasass@taibahu.edu.sa

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Ghasan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* as a representative novella of the Palestinian identity crisis among the Palestinian refugees in the aftermath of the Nakba in 1948. Kanafani's emplotment of this identity crisis is couched in a diasporic narrative that lays bare a double plot, one before 1948 and another following it. The narrative split reveals a sharp contrast between the present state of the characters on their journey to Kuwait, the promised land, and the past as revealed in their reminiscences of homeland. The paradisaic images of homeland are woven with images of Hellish existence under the scorching sun of the desert. This double narrative is indicative of the split psyche of the characters which is symptomatic of an identity crisis. Their pursuit of a way out of this conflicting state ends with a collective, tragic disillusionment; they end up dead and thrown on a garbage heap without even a proper burial place. Kanafani weaves the different mini narrative threads into one tragic denouement since his novella is not about the fate of individual characters but that of a nation. The silence of the characters prior to their death is a Kanafanian prophecy of the future of the Palestinian Cause after it has lost its power of speech and ended, like the characters, dead on the garbage heap of history.

INTRODUCTION

Exile, diaspora, and estrangement are some of the words that have been used to translate the Palestinian experience outside their homeland after the Israeli occupation of Palestine in 1948, traditionally known among Arabs as the Nakba, or the Catastrophe. Following the war, many Palestinians were dispossessed of their lands, displaced, and turned into homeless, stateless refugees in camps located in various Arab countries. Perhaps none of the words *exile*, *diaspora*, and *estrangement* captures the deep meaning that is found in such an experience as does the original Arabic word *ghourba*, and this what led many writers to insist on using this word in English. The reason lies in the unique nature of this experience which is a state of alienated exile. According to Rosemary Sayigh, *ghourba* is not to be conflated with term diaspora, usually used to refer to the Jewish realm of discourse (1979, p. 96). Edward Said, moreover, emphasizes the difference between the Palestinian experience of exile and that of the Jews in *After the Last Sky* (1999):

I do not like to call it a Palestinian diaspora: there is only an apparent symmetry between our exile and theirs [the diaspora of the Jews]. In any event, our *ghurba* or *manfa* is a much different thing because, most simply, our demographic ties to Palestine today are more substantial than Judaism's in the period before 1948. (1986, p. 115).

The experience of diasporic existence has become a part of the Palestinian collective unconscious, developed either by first-hand experience or through oral narratives of what has taken place and handed down from one generation to another. Furthermore, a large corpus of Palestinian literature has been produced since 1948 in which Palestinian novelists and poets deal with the tribulations of the exilic, alienated existence outside their homeland. In the literature of the aftermath of the Nakba, there is a prevailing sense of displacement coupled with identity crisis.

Objectives

The first objective of this study is to trace the experience of displacement and the ensuing identity crisis in Ghasan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*. The second objective is to examine whether the narrative technique, i.e., the double plot and the split narrative, serve a thematic purpose in Kanafani's novella. The last objective of this study is to analyze Kanafani's characterization and how the characters in the novella are structured in such a way as to represent the Palestinian characters in the real world. *Men in the Sun*, after all, is a story that narrates what the Palestinian refugees as a nation, not as distinct individuals, suffered in the aftermath of the Nakba in 1948.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the plethora of studies published on *Men in the Sun*, it is still a source for re-examining the Palestinian narrative, the fictive and the real. As Abas Shibliak puts it:

There is a shortage of studies on the Palestinian diaspora despite the large number of important works written mainly on the political context and on specific Palestinian refugee situations. In fact, Palestinian refugees were often looked upon through the prism of a political perspective. Their existence as a transitional community, their civic status in host societies and their personal narratives were rarely examined. (2005, p. 7)

Men in the Sun provides a space to shed light on the missed experience of the Palestinians' civic status in exile. Taken out of the political arena, the Palestinian experience warrants more examination of what ordinary men experience and what is left out without documentation. Hence, addressing *Men in the Sun* again and again might not be flogging a dead horse, as some critics would have it.

Edward Said summarizes the traumatic exilic experience and its impact on the Palestinian identity in that "the essence of the Palestinian identity has paradoxically been the experience of dispossession and loss, which everyone has lived through and which no one has fully been able to convey" (1986, p. 120). This might be true about the historical documentation of the 1948 war and its aftermath. However, the corpus of literary works attests to another kind of documentation by various Palestinian novelists. Probably one of the seminal narratives that tackle the traumatic experience of exile and identity crisis is Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* (1963). The novella seems to mirror Kanafani's first-hand experience of living in exile in Lebanon and elsewhere in other Arab countries. "At the age of twelve, Kanafani went through the trauma of becoming a refugee, and thereafter he lived in exile in various Arab countries, not always with official approval" (Kanafani, 1999, p. 10). In her introduction to the translation of the novella, Hillary Kilpatrick argues that Kanafani moved to Lebanon where he had to remain hidden because of his lack of official papers, just like many other Palestinians living under the same conditions.

Amy Zalman traces the relationship between the masculine and the national identity as depicted in *Men in the Sun*. According to Zalman, the characters in the novella can be divided into two categories: Those who die at the end and the ones who remain alive. The death of the first category represents the failure of the inexperienced Palestinian refugees dying as victims in exile, whereas Abul Khaizuran, who remains alive, represents "a map in miniature of the nation itself at a formative juncture, marked with loss, shame, and impotence" (Zalman, 2002, p. 21). The novella itself, therefore, is a translation of a national failure into "the easily legible figure of a man whose body is a failure because it has been castrated" (Zalman, 2002, p. 23).

METHOD

The method employed in this study rests mainly on textual analysis of *Men in the Sun* and compare it to other literary

works by Palestinian writers, such as Mahmoud Darwish and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra. Furthermore, the study deals with the characters as real men, not as fictitious characters, and hence, the sociological thread is deemed necessary as a method to analyze the identity crisis they go through.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Men in the Sun depicts the story of Palestinian characters in exile where they attempt to flee difficult life conditions by crossing the borders without official papers to Kuwait, a wealthy Arab country. The title encapsulates the recurrent motifs of *the desert* and *the sun* which are used to describe their exilic experience. The sun in Kanafani's title reflects the characters' exposure to the scorching, brutal, merciless experience in the desert between Iraq and Kuwait in the cruelest month of the year, August. It signifies the exposure of Palestinians refugees in exile to a hellish existence in contrast to a paradisiac life in their homeland. Helen Schulz and Juliane Hammer explain this contrast in *The Palestinian Diaspora* where she writes:

Palestine is thus remembered and represented as a place of blossom, fragrance and color. It is experienced in highly aesthetic terms: the landscape is sensed with joy, with passion and with love. The place of exile, of ghurba, is often described as a desert-an unfriendly, hostile, dry, dangerous, empty. the desert is a place of death, not life. (Schulz and Hammer, 2003, p. 111).

The desert is one of the three "landscapes of exile" identified by Barbara M. Parmenter as literary landscapes in Palestinian literature since 1948. The other two are the city and the refugee camp (1994, p. 50). The predominant landscape in many poems and novels about exile, however, is the desert. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's title of his poem "In the Deserts of Exile" is indicative of the primacy of the desert as a master motif in Palestinian literature. The desert of exile is "a void, a non-place in which the exile exists but feels nothing of the present" (Parmenter, 1994, p. 51). Past memories of the purloined land override the present moment and split the psyche of the exile into two states of existence.

This dual existence is established in the first chapter of the novel which tells the story of Abu Qais. Lying on the earth, he remembers his feelings of the earth back at home throbbing with life beneath him. The very smell of the earth reminds him of "his wife's hair when she had just walked out of the bathroom, after washing with cold water" (p. 21). However, the other image Schulz identifies, the desert which is representative of the present, is immediately introduced to the reader when we hear the other voice telling Abu Qais that his dream of rain is not true, "No, yesterday it had not rained. The sky now could rain nothing but scorching heat and dust. Those miles of road speeding through a void, like black eternity" (p. 21).

Anyone who has read the poem "My Father" by Mahmoud Darwish notices the striking similarity of its beginning with the beginning of *Men in the Sun*.

He left gazing on the moon
And bowed to hug the soil
And prayed
For a sky without rain.

The similarities between Kanafani's depiction of Abu Qais and Darwish's image of the father in his poem are striking. What generates these parallel images is the collective unconscious of the Palestinians, or the political unconscious in James Frederic's terms, that has played a major role in shaping their world view in the aftermath of the Nakba and the Naksa. Juliane Hammer brilliantly identifies the connection between the political aspirations and the themes chosen by Palestinian poets and writers concluding that "the dream of return would have to be an important topic in Palestinian poetry and fiction" (p. 81). The dream of return is represented by the nostalgia for an old object that belongs to the distant past. One example of such an object is an old well. We find the metaphor of the well, for example, evident in the works of Kanafani, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and Darwish. Darwish's poem *The Well* again has echoes of Jabra's novel *The First Well*. Darwish goes back to "the old well" or the "first well" just like Jabra makes the well the central motif in his novel:

Be my brother! And go with me to cry in the old well
 Maybe it will be become pregnant like a woman with
 the sky
 And maybe it overflowed with meaning waiting for my
 birth
 from my *first well*.

Jabra's title *The First Well* immediately comes to our minds when one of the characters in *Men in the Sun*, entering the water tank for the first time, says that it is "a cursed well" (p. 55). The sounds strike the ear in their contrasting effects. The first well is a symbol of life-giving source, the physical well with plenty of water as much as the social, cultural well which nurtures the young Palestinians to transform ultimately into a well of memories for Jabra. In contrast, the "cursed well" inside the waterless tank under the merciless desert in Kanafani's novella has a limited amount of oxygen for the characters to remain alive, and thus represents a sharp contrast to the life-giving old well back at home.

The English translation by Hillary Kilpatrick in 1999 under the title *Men in the Sun and Other Stories* captures the soul of the Arabic text. She beautifully captures the tone of voice in the Arabic text when Kanafani employs the influential technique of interior dialogue. Abu Qais is speaking to himself using the pronoun "you" as if he were another person stepping outside and starts blaming him:

In the last ten years you have done nothing but wait. You have needed ten big hungry years to be convinced that you have lost your trees, your house, and your whole village. People have been making their 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? Wealth to come through the roof of your house? Your house? It is not your house.

When reading this interior dialogue, one tends to forget that Abu Qais is speaking to himself, and instead someone else is speaking to him; this is indicative of the intense dialogical voice that permeates the text and which simultaneously hints at the split psyche of the Palestinian outside their homeland. The identity crisis takes place during the exilic experience in which the familiar self is dislocated as much

as the idea of homeland is replaced by another less familiar one. With the loss of the land represented by the village, the house, and the olive trees, many of the displaced Palestinians, originally living in villages, underwent a traumatic experience. Let's take an example of Kilpatrick's translation and compare it with the original text:

The lorry moved over the sandy track with a muted noise, while he went on thinking. He wasn't thinking in the strict sense of the term, but a series of disconnected scenes was passing ceaselessly through his brain, incoherent and inexplicable ...

Here we have a very impressive translation with the alliteration of the "s" sound that does not have a counterpart in the Arabic origin. Kilpatrick succeeds in rendering the Arabic text in English without doing much harm that usually occurs in translating literary works. Her reading of the characters is geared towards indicting the characters' worldly pursuits. She reads the novella as "an expose of their (the characters') weakness in preferring the search for material security over the fight to regain their land" (p. 11). In my opinion, Kilpatrick's interpretation of the characters is tendentious. If there is a critique in this novella, it is not directed against the characters who end tragically thrown on a garbage heap but directed against the exilic context where Palestinians turn into victims who lost their voice to speak for themselves.

Ghassan Kanafani is a writer who practices his art as a translator. Great writers always do. They translate the story within, the story which, according to Marcel Proust, is in each of us. We have the original text in our minds, in our memory, and in our hearts. The writer merely translates it to us so that when we see it, we recognize it not as something new, but familiar and at the same time recognize it in an artistic cloak of de-familiarization. To read and understand, not interpret, is to have the Palestinian original novella inside us before reading the text outside, there on the page. Without having the original story inside, no interaction is possible and little understanding follows, if any.

The character that shows interest in money for its own sake is Abul Khaizuran, but even this hungry quest after money is not done without fighting to regain his land as Kilpatrick claims. In the section entitled "The Deal" we read the following about him:

Abul Khaizuran was an excellent driver. He had served in the British army for more than five years before 1948. When he left the army and joined the Freedom Fighters, he had the reputation of being the best lorry driver one could find. That was why the commandos in AL-Tira invited him to drive an old armored car that the village had captured after a Jewish attack. (p. 47).

In a flashback in "The Road," he recalls the loss of his manhood when "hell exploded" during fighting for his country. Since then, the narrator tells us, "he had been trying to accept the situation. To confess quite simply that he had lost his manhood while fighting for his country. And what good had it done? He had lost his manhood and his country" (p. 53). If accepting means forgetting, Abul Khaizuran then is incapable of it since "he could not forget nor get used

to his tragedy.” Losing his country and losing his manhood become metaphorically, one and the same, and his tragedy, consequently, is more psychological than physical and haunting him still. The two versions of the character of Abul Khaizuran as a national hero and as an exploiter of his own people led Radwa Ashur to a double reading. According to Ashur, “He [Abul Khaizuran] is a criminal and a victim, and we commiserate with him to the same extent that we judge and reject him” (Ashur, 1977, p. 70).

Similar to Abul Khaizuran’s tragedy of loss is the tragedy of Abu Qais and his loss of his house and trees. Abu Qais contemplates the possibility of reaching Kuwait to compensate for his loss, as well as the possibility of death while trying to reach Kuwait, and in an interior dialogue “a rough voice inside his head exploded” to argue against any second thoughts he might have about going to Kuwait. The voice says, “Die! Who says that isn’t preferable to your life at the moment? For ten years you have been hoping to return to the ten olive trees that you once owned in your village. Your village! Ha!” (p. 27).

The journey Abu Qais makes does not embody something similar to the American ideal of man’s right to the pursuit of happiness; it rather embodies the Palestinian ordeal of man’s desperate attempt to salvage a lost hope in regaining a lost paradise: a few acres with olive trees that symbolize an end of the cataclysmic flood that swept men away from their homeland. The path Abu Qais takes, along with Assad and Marwan, is neither flowery nor shady; it is a long path under the harsh August sun in the desert that stands for the Palestinians’ descent into hell, not different from the hell which took Abul Khaizuran’s manhood. One is a battle for the land; the other is a battle for life, and in each there are martyrs, and even Shafeeqa, the second wife of Marwan’s father, has lost one of her legs due to a mortar shell in one of the battles.

In their exile, the characters undergo humiliation that adds to their tragic fate. This humiliation is hinted at early in the story of Abu Qais when he embarks on a series of flashbacks remembering in one of them Ustaz Selim:

The mercy of God be upon you, Ustaz Selim. God was certainly good when he made you die one night before the wretched village fell into the hands of the Jew. One night only. O God, is there any divine favor than that?. But all the same you stayed there. You stayed there. You saved yourself humiliation and wretchedness, and you preserved your old age from shame. (pp. 23-24)

One by one, the characters are subjected to humiliation at the hands of the fat man who wants to exploit their situation. Evelin Lindner and others argue that although the victimization and traumatization of Palestinians have been widely discussed, but not so the role of humiliation and the role it plays in the Palestinian experience and how it leads to violence even among Palestinian themselves (p. 101). Abu Qais leaves the fat man with tears on his face, Assad remembers how the authorities subject him to humiliating treatment for being an activist, and Marwan receives a slap from the fat man for negotiating the price for taking him to Kuwait.

The story ends with the three men thrown on a garbage heap in the middle of the night. This is Kanafani’s ultimate image of humiliation. How can we understand such a bleak ending Kanafani must have painfully felt while writing? Why did not the men knock at the sides of the water tank and remain silent till suffocation? According to Kilpatrick, many readers took the ending literally when it was first published in 1962 and accused Kanafani of throwing the Palestinians on the rubbish pile. She does not provide any literary reading except saying that “there is more to it than that” (p. 11).

The voiceless characters die in silence without any attempt to call out for help. Their death is metaphoric of the death of the Palestinian Cause when these characters are viewed as subaltern subjects that pass into oblivion without the power to speak. They have already lost everything, and their final loss is that of their power to voice themselves. Their death is representative of the death of the Palestinian Cause having no voice.

The place where the three men die, the border between Arab countries, is significant. Is this an indication that the fragmentation of the Arab World is injurious to the Palestinian Cause? Or could it be that there is a zone of silence through which Palestinians must pass first in order to flee one hell to another in their pursuit of life, just life, somewhere to breathe but ironically where they suffocate? Kanafani is by no means guilty of silencing his characters. He gave them instead a full expression through flashbacks, interior monologues as well as interior dialogues.

CONCLUSION

Mohammed Siddiq argues that the end of the novel reveals the falsehood of the dream of “replacement of Palestine with the pan-Arabic dream” (as cited in Gertz and Khleifi, 2008, p. 84). From another perspective, if we view discarding objects on a rubbish pile when they are no longer useful, then the image of the three men thrown there might be an indication to the future of the Palestinian Cause when it is no longer profitable to someone like Abul Khaizuran. It is the rubbish pile of history to bury lost causes discarded in the middle of the night without even granting them their burial rites. When Abul Khaizuran asks the question: “Why didn’t you knock on the sides of the tank?” he is not expecting answers. In fact, the question here is not posed to be answered, but it is a form of an acquittal of the self and laying all the blame on the three men who caused their own death. This is how he can leave them on the garbage heap with a guiltless conscience. The victimized are their own murderers; no one to blame.

Men in the Sun summarizes the death of the Palestinian voice in the Arab world and blaming the voiceless for it. The last scene ends in horror and darkness that engulf the three men and extend beyond the text to engulf the reader as well. We close the novella with a shudder, sadder but by no means wiser. Kanafani ends *Men in the Sun* just like Darwish ends his poem “My Father” where the latter pronounces the fate of the exile: “A man without a homeland/Will have no grave in the land.” Kanafani went further to deny them even the grave which is replaced by the garbage heap. Thus, the dream of the Palestinian exile of a regaining their paradisaical

life at home turns into a nightmarish existence ending in a Kafkaesque exeunt.

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