



THE PALESTINIAN IDENTITY AND ITS SYMBOLIST TREATMENT IN GHASSAN KANAFANI'S "MEN IN THE SUN"

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to tackle the most important theme dealt with in Ghassan Kanafani's novel *Men in Sun*. The Palestinian identity is the main issue that occupies the book. It is the subject matter, the motivation and the purpose of writing the novel. This paper highlights the extent of the author's affinity to the time, setting and characters of the story. The story of *Men in the Sun* is the story of the whole Palestinian people, not of a person or a few people. It is the story of an entire people suffering humiliation, loss, deprivation and injustice. It is the people deprived of a decent life since the first Nakba in 1948. Kanafani in this work narrates story of three suffering Palestinian men, representing different generations who forcibly left their homeland to the unknown world waiting for a simple hope or a thin dream. It is the story of a vivid and sincere portrayal of the Palestinian asylum, with its accompanying bitterness, humiliation and hunger. All Palestinian generations, under the burden of displacement, suffer from alienation and loss of identity, seeking to find a place in the sun. Thus, this novel gives a profound expression of the Palestinian will to reserve its identity before this action was integrated into a political framework. It provides a picture of the Palestinian identity questions in the preset-back of June 1967. This paper shows the aesthetic dimensions in the story like realistic, romantic and symbolic trends and how the author combines them successfully to enhance his theme of the question of Palestinian identity. It symbolically represents, in its entirety, a critical trial of all the circumstances in which it operates.

KEYWORDS : Palestinian Identity, diaspora, death, homeland, injustice, humiliation.

Introduction:

The Palestinian literature has become very important for the Palestinian displaced because it addresses the essence of its cause and is the Palestinian identity and how to preserve it in the diaspora. Palestinian literature, thus, has become one of the other aspects of the struggle against the occupier and its means to record and preserve the Arab-Israeli conflict since the Nakba of 1948 and to this day. When the Nakba occurred, most of the residents of the Palestinian cities migrated and this caused a deep shake in the structure of the Palestinian society because the cities are considered the center of the political, intellectual and social leadership of any society. Because of this bulldozing of the Palestinian society, the Israeli occupation managed to restrain any political or literary current there, in addition to planting suspicious currents threatening the Palestinian identity. Therefore, we find that the Palestinian literature is committed to its first central case is the Palestinian case and the Palestinian identity in the face of the Diaspora and the Arab fragmentation on this issue. In this context, this novel *Men in the Sun* has come to document a part of the struggle of the Palestinian people after the 1948 catastrophe and the suffering as a result of the tragedy of the occupation, the absence of Palestinian leadership and the corruption of the Arab leadership.

Men in the Sun is the first novel by the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani, published in 1963 in Beirut. The novel describes the effects of the Nakba in 1948 on the Palestinian people through four characters representing different generations. It presents the Palestinian in the refugee formula, which is developed by Ghassan Kanafani in his following novels: *What is left to you*, and *Return to Haifa* where the Palestinian identity is rediscovered and redefined in line with the development of the Palestinian cause itself. This novel is, thus, a complex argument for Palestinian questions and the tragic existential questions.

The theme of Identity distorted between homeland and Diaspora:

Homeland and the sense of identity and belonging to a certain community are considered the key theme discussed explained and dramatized in the novel. The main theme of the novel is its talk of homelessness and death. It reflects the Palestinian cause, the events of the Nakba of 1948, and its impact on the Palestinian people through four Palestinian men of different generations who tell their story in a wonderful symbolic way. The home of all the characters of

the novel is not ruled by a national state so that their sense of home is distorted between their home where they left, their temporary home where they are now and home where they can find jobs to realized their dreamed home. Thus, what does home means for them is not clearly defined. As a consequence of colonization of Palestine, the three characters left their original home as a scape to free themselves if not possible their land. The sense of identity and home belonging live within them but now they look for another home substitute where they can live on. Their substitute land, Kuwait, is the country that presents a healthier possibility of surviving and the three characters, Marwan, Abu Qais, and Assad, each has personal goal to achieve. They seek a way to be smuggled across a hot and dangerous desert so that they may find what will keep them and their families alive and to realize their own dreams. For all the three people and the smuggler as well, home becomes the road where they travel towards their own final destination that is unreachable by the three main characters.

The author presents several incidents conducted by imaginary characters, but they represent the realistic experience if the Palestinian people in the diaspora. When you read the novel, you find that every line of the novel contains a reference directly or indirectly to the Situation of the Palestinian people 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 novel dramatically articulates the state of suffering that overwhelmed many of the displaced families. Ghassan Kanafani discloses the political, social and human realities that characterize the lives of the Palestinian people at a critical time in their history, when the traditional system and its structure reflect a profound change in events both at the regional and international levels. The novel presents the details of hardship and struggle by three Palestinian men, Abu Qais, As'ad and Marwan, all seeking a better life. Individual conflicts are the cruel realities of the lives of many of the Palestinian people who have been forced into exile and abandoned the homeland. *Men in the Sun* has its own autobiographical element as it is to be considered as the result of Kanafani's own experience when he had to remain hidden in the house for more than a month because of his lack of official papers proving his identity. He himself was a refugee. Kanafani's novel was to be able to prove pain and suffering to us through the three parties to the conflict, which is their journey to death. There are six chapters in the novel. The first three chapters show each protagonist and

explain why they chose this route to Kuwait. The three struggled to offer their quest for what they thought would be stability and happiness.

The story centered on the idea of the land as the value of existence, the mark of identity on the one hand, and the idea of passion with its psychological and social dimensions on the other hand. The novelist tried to present the story in a simple symbolic framework. It is a story of symbolic dimensions to represent his condemnation to being away from the land of Palestine. Ghassan Kanafani presents the character of "Abu Qaizuran" as a model of the opportunistic leadership that claims to think about the total while seeking for its own interests, no matter how hurt others. Abu Qaizuran agrees with the three that two remain on top of the tank and the third sits with him. Thus, alternately all the way in a desert, the sun sends a barrage of deadly flame, and before they reach the border point by 50 meters they enter the reservoir and he must complete the procedures in no more than seven minutes. Then, he drives the car 50 meters from the border point and call the three men to come out of the tank.

The characterization:

The novel *Men in the Sun*, published in 1963, is one of the first most important and most prominent novels by Ghassan Kanafani. It takes the Palestinian identity as its central theme. It deals with homelessness and death that Palestinian people faces, and it reflects the Palestinian cause following the 1948 catastrophe. The novel discloses its impact on the Palestinian people through four Palestinian men from different generations who tell their story in a wonderful symbolic way. The characters of this story are Abu Qais, As'ad, Marwan, and Abu Al-AL-Qaizuran. Each of them has his own personal problem in addition to the problem of the homeland.

The novel narrates the story of three men who decide to illegally emigrate from Palestine to Kuwait in order to improve their living conditions. Another man, Abu Kauzoran, is willing to help them by transporting them in his truck. They must hide in the tank until they pass the border points. The novel ends with the death of the three men suffocating for fear of beating the walls of the reservoir. Kanafani explains in a dramatic manner the trauma that encompasses the life of a refugee through three different male characters from three different generations with the use of metaphors. The three characters come together with a common goal in mind; escape the poverty and oppression in their camps to seek work and opportunity in Kuwait. The oldest of the three, Abu Qais, seeks a new life in order to support his wife, his son, and his newborn. Marwan, the youngest of the three, seeks a new life to support his mother and siblings and to prove to his father that he could support himself and his family better than he did. Assad, a strong man, stands for the middle generation whose life cannot become any worse than it already is. He has attempted several times to escape the hardships of his homeland life in the past, but each effort is futile, as the smugglers that are supposed to transport him to Kuwait leave him in the middle of nowhere to cook under a blistering desert sun. The three men are connected through a character named Abul Khaizuran, a smuggler, who convinces the men that he will successfully transport them to Kuwait for the cheapest price.

Abu Qais is the first character introduced in the story. Kanafani first introduces Abu Qais, the oldest of the three characters seeking opportunity. He is married and he has a son named Qais in who is in grade school. His wife has just given birth to their second child, thus creating a tougher environment to survive. Abu has another human life to take care of and to feed and support. This pushes Abu to seek a better work life that will result in more money to help support his family. In the first lines of the story Kanafani uses powerful language to describe Abu Qais:

'Abu Qais rested on the damp ground, and the earth began to throb under him with tired heartbeats, which trembled through the grains of sand and penetrated the cells of his body. Every time he threw

himself down with his chest to the ground he sensed that throbbing, as though the heart of the earth had been pushing its difficult way towards the light from the utmost depths of hell ever since the first time he had lain there. Once when he said that to his neighbor, with whom he shared the field in the land he left ten years ago, the man answered mockingly: 'It's the sound of your own heart. You can hear it when you lay your chest to the ground'" (*Men in the Sun*, p. 21)

Abu Qais, who lost his house and olive trees and lives with his pregnant wife and his young son in the camps, does not dare to think about traveling to Kuwait. Many traveled and returned with the money to realize their own personal dreams. Abu Qais is very rooted into his homeland. Abu Qais is an old man. He responds to the pressure exerted on him by one of the rich returnees and the state of extreme poverty which he and his family suffer, leaving his wife and son and traveling to Iraq to try to find a chance to escape across the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border from Basra to Kuwait to get the money that builds a house and buy new olive trees.

Assad is a strong character who has no one but himself to support. His character really portrays the desperateness in the Palestinian heart, as he cannot stand the life he lives in a land where he is looked down upon. He is not being pulled to Kuwait to seek opportunity for his family; he is being pushed from his home by the meek opportunity left for survival. Kuwait is a land where he would be accepted and given the opportunity to work as one of the people. He would not be looked down upon in Kuwait as some inferior being who is worth nothing like he is in his homeland. Assad, on several past occasions, fails to be smuggled to Kuwait by men who said they could transport him there safely. He has been left for dead and luckily was picked up by an Arab couple traveling the road he had finally stumbled upon after spending hours struggling through the desert. This makes him much more careful when he decides whom he will pay to smuggle him.

Marwan is the youngest character of the three and is anxiously attempting to help support his mother and siblings. Marwan's father divorced his mother for a woman whose father had money and thus ceased supporting his family. Marwan's older brother Zakaria, who had escaped the homeland and found Kuwait, had been supporting them since their father left. Once Zakaria becomes married, however, he can no longer support his mother and siblings and Marwan decides that he is going to be the man of the house. He wants to prove to his mother that he can support them, but even more so, he wants to prove to his father that he can do a better job feeding his family than he did. After being slapped by a big fat man, who sets up smuggling deals in his hometown, he finds himself alone in the busy street, sitting. Kanafani describes Marwan as:

'Crowds of people walked past without paying him any attention. Perhaps it was the first time in his life that he had found himself alone and a stranger in a throng of people like this. He wanted to know the reason for that remote sensation that gave him contentment and rest; a sensation like the one he used to have when he had finished watching a film, and felt like life was grand and vast, and that in the future he would be one of those men who spend every hour and day of their lives in exciting fulfillment and variety. But what was the reason for his having such a feeling now, when he had not seen a film like that for a long time, and only a few minutes before the threads of hope that had woven fine dreams in his heart had been broken in the fat man's shop?' (*Men in the Sun*, p. 37)

Then, there is also the character of the smuggler, Abu Kaizoran. He is in charge of driving a lorry back and forth from the three men's homeland to Kuwait for his boss. Abul Kaizoran's life is a tragic one, as Abul was captured by the enemy and was literally and physically stripped of his manhood, while he was fighting for his country in the past. This becomes evident when he is asked why he wasn't married. He suddenly has a flashback of the terrifying incident as he is driving and becomes petrified with the thought. A pain throbs in his inner thigh region whenever this memory takes the wheel of his mind. He wants to give to the three men the opportunity they seek in Kuwait.

Symbolism:

This novel has been subjected to multidirectional critical studies. Critics differed about the classification of this novel. Some critics think that it has the features of reality in general and social reality in particular. Other critics also find the presence of the features of romance in it. There are the critics who see the presence of the features of symbolism in the novel. The researcher here believes that one of the dominant feature is the symbolic trend. The author uses some symbolic characters to stand for the Palestinian people and their leaders and the Arab leadership. Thus, Kanafani artistically employed the symbols to address the real issues. Kanafani portray his characters, events and places in a symbolic language using symbolism and metaphors to evoke the human sympathy with the characters while travelling the road seeking the realization of their dreams. The novelist employees the artistic constructional elements, particularly the element of place, to embody the Palestinian identity rooted in land. It is the land that gives them life and its abandonment means death. In addition, it embodies the unfair Arabic reality against the Palestinian individual. It is a call to hold on to the land and to be rooted on it.

The novel is replete with symbolism. Some of the symbolic objects are of contradictory nature. The title itself refers to introductory symbolism. The word "men" makes us imagine heroes who represent the virility and essence of manhood, while their actions fail us, and we trample on the extent of their defeat and dispersion. The word "sun", which overwhelms us with its light and radiance and gives us the glimmer of life once it is pronounced, becomes a deadly tool in the novel and a source of concern and condemnation. In this novel, Kanafani uses the road to represent the struggle of life the characters go through to reach their dreams. Seeking freedom from this struggle is the struggle in itself. Kanafani really does a fantastic job portraying this theme in his novel. His use of metaphors and symbolism invokes the human heart to beat right along with the men in traveling this road searching for their dream.

The protagonists of the story (Abu Qais, As'ad and Marwan) symbolize the entire Palestinian people. Al-Basrawi symbolizes human exploitation in its worst form. Customs officials symbolize the Arab official and corrupt bureaucracy. The desert symbolizes the space between life and death. The reservoir symbolizes siege, imprisonment, grave and death. Death symbolizes the escape to a new life. Abu Kaizuran symbolizes the Palestinian leadership, as Kanafani has deliberately selected this character to be a Palestinian. This central character is given the role of driving the other three characters representing the whole Palestinian nation. He symbolizes the Palestinian leadership that is unable to protect its people. He, a smuggler, offered to the three men to transport them on the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border for a sum of money. The writer depicts the figure of Abu Kaizoran as an opportunistic leadership that does not care about the fate of its people in exchange for fulfilling its personal desires and benefits. Abu Kaizoran, a skilled driver, worked in the British army and worked with the Palestinian fighters. He was hit by a bomb that lost his manhood and gave him all the bitterness of the world. His own thought and all his ambition are to create a wealth in which he lived in peace and quiet after a lifetime of restless movement. The most important thing in the life of men is the homeland, but the homeland did not return, and his manhood also lost forever. Thus, Abo Qaizoran is a victim and the others are his victims. After he had lost his manhood and his homeland, he has become a victim, but he has become a big rat looking for his victims. He is the leader of the journey of perdition, a leadership that does not fulfill its promises and responsibilities.

The car is a very old water tank truck with a huge empty tank, where the three protagonists will disappear to cross the Iraqi and Kuwaiti border points. Kanafani employed the water tank in the form of a clear paradox. Water is the main element of life, but in this novel he made the reservoir empty of water, as if he meant empty life. He explained in his novel that the reservoir had not carried water for a long time. Kanafani used the tank ironically when the tank is not used in its original purpose, carrying water, but it carries death

instead. Thus, the reservoir is then a symbol of the siege and imprisonment of the Palestinian people with its corrupt Arab leadership and Palestinian leadership, symbolized by the driver driving the reservoir towards death. The reservoir is the image of hell and the height of the tragedy that the Palestinians are living in. It is the big prison that they have to break down its walls if they want to survive.

The basic symbolic event of the story is that the walls of the tank are not pounded, as these three men die of suffocation in the reservoir, without any of them daring to knock the walls of the reservoir for help. The symbolism here lies in the lack of sounding of the walls which stems from the legitimate screams that are missing and required by the Palestinian people. The sound of the reservoir is an equivalent to Palestinian sound that is missed. Homelessness is accumulated by the silence of the Palestinians who do not dare speak or even think about confronting this dire situation. In the novel, novelist Ghassan Kanafani condemns all the parties that caused the Palestinian Nakba; the defeated Palestinian leadership, the Arab leadership, the surrendering people, and all those who abandoned their land in search of personal, individual salvation.

Conclusion:

This paper has the most recurrent important theme dealt with in Ghassan Kanafani's novels one of which is *Men in Sun*. That recurrent theme is the Palestinian identity which is the main issue that occupies the book. It is the subject matter, the motivation and the purpose of writing the novel. This paper has shed light on the extent of the author's affinity to the time, setting and characters of the story. The novel describes the effects of the Nakba in 1948 on the Palestinian people through four characters representing different generations. It presents the Palestinian in the refugee formula, which is developed by Ghassan Kanafani in his following novels. The novel conveys its impact on the Palestinian people through four Palestinian men from different generations who tell their story in a wonderful symbolic way. The characters of this story, Abu Qais, As'ad, Marwan, and Abu Al-AL-Qaizuran, have their own personal problems in addition to the problem of the homeland.

Symbolism is one of the dominant feature of the novel. The author uses some symbolic characters to stand for the Palestinian people and their leaders and the Arab leadership. Thus, Kanafani artistically employed the symbols to address the real issues. Kanafani portray his characters, events and places in a symbolic language using symbolism and metaphors to evoke the human sympathy with the characters while travelling the road seeking the realization of their dreams. The novelist employees the artistic constructional elements, particularly the element of place, to embody the Palestinian identity rooted in land. It is the land that gives them life and its abandonment means death. In addition, it embodies the unfair Arabic reality against the Palestinian individual.

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