

MEN IN THE SUN: THE PALESTINIAN DIASPORA

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Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. Edward Said (*Reflections on Exile*)

Introduction

Ghassan Kanafani's stories of the struggle of men and women to free themselves from certain inhuman forms of exploitation, oppression, and persecution are undoubtedly related to the ideas, values and feelings by which men and women--especially Palestinians--experience their society and their existential, political, and historical situation. That is to say, to understand Kanafani's ideological orientation and commitment is to understand both the past of the Palestinians and their present more deeply: an understanding that contributes to their liberation, and to human liberation in general. As Ihsan Abbas (1972) notices, it is not difficult for any reader of first Kanafani's novel *Men In The Sun* (1978) and then *All That Remains* (1983) to notice a gradual, conscious, deliberate movement towards a clear reality: a new reality that makes us see what we have never seen before, that moves us into a new order of perception and experience altogether. In other words, both *Men In The Sun* and *All That Remains* have a great artistic influence that emerges from a confrontation with reality, rather than an attempt to escape from it.

Questions of exile, death, and history are what *Men In The Sun* (Kanafani, 1978) tries to answer--questions that Kanafani asks and helps us to answer. As a writer, he is not only a Palestinian refugee placed in society responding to a general history from his own particular standpoint, making sense of it in his own concrete terms; what he also has at his disposal is an ideological perspective that helps him to penetrate to the realities of men's experience in specific historical and political situations. Hence the reality of the characters in *Men In The Sun*, the natural dialogues, and the details make all the characters people whom we know very well; it supplies us with details that every Palestinian reader is familiar with, and events most Palestinians have experienced. The shocking end, however, is a new reality that we try to avoid confronting. It is a story of three Palestinian refugees in exile struggling to build--or rather rebuild--a future, which is the whole subject of the text. The story concerns three Palestinian refugees who move from Jordan to Iraq in order to escape to Kuwait, where they wish to earn money and bring an end to their poverty. The text is "an expose of their weakness in preferring the search for material security to the fight to regain their land, as well as an attack on the corruption of the Arab regimes" (Kilpatrick, 1978:3) and the Palestinian leadership which allow them to suffocate in an airless, marginal world of refugee camps (Kilpatrick: 3).

It is, then, a classical Palestinian journey that is different from other classical journeys in the sense that its destination is not knowledge, a journey whose heroes are neither knights nor kings (Ashur, 1977:30). Rather, it is a journey with Palestinian characteristics that dominated the 1950's (Ashur:30). The journey is that of three Palestinians--representing three different generations--led by a Palestinian lorry driver from

Basra to Kuwait. In order to pass the Iraqi-Kuwaiti checkpoints, they are forced to hide in the tank of the lorry, which causes their death, suffocating in the burning desert, far from their families. At the end of the novel, the driver throws their corpses onto a garbage heap.

The first three chapters of the text are dominated by the internal monologues of the three passengers describing the background they have come from, and the reasons for their journey. The first one is Abu Qais, the old peasant whose memories of the land left behind and of his daughter's birth a month after the family left the village have shaped his background; he left his wife and two children in the camp. He is a poor, downtrodden man who dreams of a paradise protecting him and offering him money in order to "be able to send Qais [his son] to school" and "[to] buy one or two olive shoots" and to be "able to build a shack somewhere":

On the other side of this Shatt, just the other side, were all the things he had been deprived of. Over there was Kuwait. What only lived in his mind as a dream and a fantasy existed there. It was certainly something real, of stones, earth, water, and sky, not as it slumbered in his troubled mind. There must be lanes and streets, men and women, and children running about between the trees. (13)

Ten years have passed, and Abu Qais has done nothing to regain his land, although it is all that he thinks about. However, in order to secure a better material life for his family, he starts the fateful journey:

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, your youth, and your whole village. People have been making their own way during these long years, while you have been squatting like an old dog in a miserable hut. What do you think you were waiting for? Wealth to come through the roof of your house? Your house? It is not your house. (13)

Waiting is what he has been doing until Saad, his friend, urged him to go to Kuwait:

Do you like this life here? Ten years have passed and you live like a beggar. It's disgraceful. Your son, Qais, when will he go back to school? Soon the other one will grow up. How will you be able to look at him when you haven't...? (14)

It is poverty, then, which forces him to "carry all [his] years on [his] shoulders and flee across the desert to Kuwait to find a crust of bread" (11).

The second passenger, Assad, is a Palestinian youth who is wanted by the authorities in Jordan for his political activities. In order to escape, he borrows money from his uncle on the condition that he should marry his cousin. And the only alternative to earn money is Kuwait: "I will be able return the amount to my uncle in less than a month. A man can collect money in the twinkling of an eye there in Kuwait" (19).

Marwan, the youngest passenger, is chained with the responsibility of looking after his mother and four young brothers without being able to hate his father, who has left them to marry another woman--a woman with one leg. What the father has done is, undoubtedly, another way of approaching financial stability:

He told himself, in fact he told us all, that life is an extra-ordinary business, and that a man wants to be able to settle down in his old age and not find himself obliged to feed half a dozen open mouths...Who would feed the mouths? Who would pay for the rest of Marwan's education, and buy Mai's clothes, and bring back bread for Riyad, Salma, and Hasan? Who? " He is penniless [...] His one and only ambition was to move from the mud house which he had occupied in the camp for ten years and live under a concrete roof, as he used to say...His old fiend, Shafiq's father, suggested he should marry her. He told himself she owns a three-room house on the edge of the town...[i]f he let

two rooms and lived with his lame wife in the third, he would live out the rest of his life in security [...] And more important than that, under a concrete roof. (26)

Again, the solution is Kuwait, which will enable Marwan to "send every penny he earn[s] to his mother, and overwhelm her and his brothers and sisters with gifts till he [makes] the mud hut into a paradise on earth and his father bite his nails with regret" (29).

It becomes clear, then, that the solution that these characters have come to is only an individualistic one--a solution that is, geo-politically, wrong. In other words, instead of following the correct direction--westward--that leads them from Jordan to Palestine in order to regain their land, they move eastward. Since the direction is wrong, and since the solution is individualistic, it is doomed to failure. Hence one can comprehend the sense of alienation that chains the heroes: in Asa'ad's first journey from Jordan to Iraq, "he felt he was alone in the whole world" (18). And Marwan has the same feeling in Basra after bargaining with a fat professional smuggler: "[p]erhaps it was the first time in his life that he had found himself alone and a stranger in a throng of people like this" (23). This is the alienation of the innocent in a world of experience (Ashur:1977). In other words, despite their economic problems, it is their first time to confront, as individuals, a greedy, exploitative world--an ugly, dirty world full of big rats which eat "[r]ats smaller than them." What the fat smuggler says to Asa'ad is important: "[b]ut take care the rats don't eat you before you set out" (p.22). However, they arrange a deal with another smuggler/rat, i.e., Abu Khaizuran.

The uneasiness one feels as soon as one starts reading is not strange in the sense that one is kept waiting for something to happen; and by the end, the deliberate, detailed description of the corpses, thrown on the garbage, raises an essential question: why has the narrator chosen a Palestinian driver rather than an Iraqi? (Abbas, 1972) Taking Abu Khaizuran, the driver, as a fourth Palestinian directing the three generations becomes significant in the sense that one cannot but take him as a metaphor for the ineffective, politically impotent Palestinian leadership, which plays a destructive role based on cunning and hypocrisy:

For the first time since Marwan had set eyes on [Abu Khaizuran], he really did remind one of a cane. He was very tall, very thin, but his neck and hands had a suggestion of strength and firmness, and for some reason he looked as though he could bend down and put his head between his legs without it upsetting his spine or his other bones at all. (24)

Of course, the question as to why Kanafani chooses a man who has lost his sexual power to lead the three Palestinians becomes comprehensible when we are told that Abu Khaizuran has lost it in the 1948 war, a war in which the leadership suffered from impotence, despite which it insisted on directing and trying to salvage the Palestinians.

The light was shining so brightly that at first he could see nothing. But he felt a terrible pain coiled between his thighs [...] [h]e could only remember one thing which had happened to him a moment before, and nothing else. He and a number of armed men were running along when all hell exploded in front of him and he fell forward on his face. That was all. And now, the terrible pain was still plunging between his thighs and the huge round light was still hanging over his eyes and he was trying to see things and people. [...] Suddenly a black thought occurred to him and he began to scream like a madman. [...] Now...ten years had passed since that horrible scene. Ten years had passed since they took his manhood from him, and he had lived that humiliation day after day and hour after hour. He had swallowed it with his pride, and examined it every moment of those ten years. And still he hadn't yet got used to it, he hadn't accepted it. For ten long years he had been trying to accept the situation? But what 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, and damn everything in this bloody world. (37-38)

In spite of this, and in spite of their awareness that Abu Khaizuran, the leader, works with another smuggler, Haj Ridda, the Kuwiati, still Abu Qais, Asa'd, and Marwan, with horrible naivety, believe they can be salvaged by the same leadership. In other words, they are generations which accept their temporary chains--generations which have no intention of rebelling against the political reality they face. What Asa'ad says sums up everything: "[p]ersonally, I'm interested in reaching Kuwait. I'm not concerned with anything else. That is why I shall travel with Abu Khaizuran"(36). And the result is undignified death.

These three Palestinian refugees who, despite their age difference and despite their different problems, seek one common thing. Their aim is to bring an end to their poverty, since each has been plucked from his roots, and to achieve economic stability--needs which are universal. Even Abu Khazuran's "big wish" is "to rest in the shade" after he collects some money (40). The shade, indeed, doesn't appear throughout the whole text except as a wish, a hope, and a nice word uttered by all of them; three generations that have been deprived of the shade, and, ironically, all of them head towards a country where there is not even a single tree--a fact which surprises Abu Qais, the old farmer.

These men, moving under the sun, know nothing about the sun's light and warmth, i.e., they are not conscious of their right to a normal human life (Ashur:34). Rather, the sun they experience is a burning, torturing sun:

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. They used to be told that someone wasn't coming back from Kuwait because he'd died; he'd been killed by a sun-stroke. He'd been driving his shovel into the earth when he fell on to one knee and then on both. And then what? He was killed by sunstroke. Do you want him buried here or there? That was all, sunstroke. [...] 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? [...]

"This is the Hell that I heard of" (p.48).

The hell of exile is, then, the product of an individualistic escape, and the result of following an impotent leadership. The journey in the lorry under the sun, through the desert/diaspora unifies their consciousness:

None of the four wanted to talk any more, not only because they were exhausted by their efforts, but because each one was swallowed up in his own thoughts. The huge lorry was carrying them along the road, together with their dreams, their families, their hopes and ambitions, their misery and despair, their strength and weakness, their past and future, as if it were pushing against the main door to a new, unknown destiny, and all eyes were fixed on the door's surface as though bound to it by invisible threads. (46)

Marwan has to leave his school, a world of innocence, and look for a job; he has to "plunge into the frying pan for ever"; "in Kuwait [he'll] find and learn everything [...] school teaches nothing. It only teaches laziness" (47). Abu Qais will be "able to send Qais to school and buy one or two olive shoots"(46). And Asa'ad remembers how his uncle "[wishes] to marry him to his daughter." The characters here mix their consciousness and memories while they are in the lorry, which "travel[s] on over the *burning* earth" [my italics] (47).

Abu Khaizuran, the smuggler, on the other hand, is conscious of the nature of burning desert:

In my own mind I compare these hundred and fifty kilometres to the path which God in the Quran promised his creatures they must cross before being directed either to Paradise or to Hell. If anyone falls he goes to Hell, and if anyone crosses safely he reaches Paradise. Here the angels are the frontier guards. (36)

This is the consciousness of a man who is transformed into a rat that understands the nature of the desert

(Ashur:34). The desert separates two hells, i.e., poverty and exile, and whoever wants to reach the illusory paradise has to cross the burning desert. That is to say, hell is the unavoidable road one has to cross in order to achieve an individualistic aim. The narrator promises a worse examination for his characters who must not only cross the Arabian desert, but must also avoid the frontier officials. Thus there is no other alternative except hiding, twice, in the empty tank of the lorry in order to cross the Iraqi borders, and then the Kuwaiti borders. The tank is, in fact, another hell. Abu Khaizuran says: "I advise you to take your shirts off, the heat's stifling, terrifying, and you'll sweat as though you were in an oven" (41). Moreover, Asa'ad complains that "[t]his is hell. It's on fire" (41). But they consent to hide in the tank.

Their naivety reaches a level at which they surrender their destiny to an impotent leadership with whom they participate in choosing the wrong direction. What Abu Khaizuran says sums up his nature as an opportunistic leader who cannot continue the struggle:

Shall I tell you the truth? I want more money, more money, much more. And I find it difficult to accumulate money honestly. Do you see this miserable being which is me? I have some money. In two years I'll leave everything and settle down. I want to relax, to stretch out, to rest in the shade.(40)

It becomes clear, then, that the three passengers--the three generations--have reached a level at which they obey the impotent leadership blindly by staying in the burning, dark, empty water tank; they are dumb in the sense that they do not shout, and if they do, nobody hears them. Hence they are no less impotent than Abu Khaizuran, or rather the leadership which--despite the masses' suffering--deals with a corrupt, reactionary bureaucracy, i.e., with the Kuwaiti officials and Haj Rida, the main smuggler.

One can thus comprehend the different metaphors which in concert become a metaphor for much of the Arab World, a world that is a moving, burning oven with people chained by the desire to save as much money as they can. Here we see the smugglers as well as corrupt bureaucrats who suffer from sexual deprivation. At a crucial point in the journey, the men in the sun are stopped near the end of their journey by a border guard who cannot resist the opportunity to hear what he hopes will be a lurid story:

The story of depravity had excited him. He had thought about it day and night, endowing it with all the obscenity created by his long, tormenting deprivation. The idea that a friend of his had slept with a prostitute was exciting, and worth all those dreams. (51)

Roger Allan writes in *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (1982): "[The novel's] message concerning the inability of Palestinians to find a place or role for themselves in the glare of harsh reality and their exploitation by Arabs of other nationalities is conveyed with tremendous clarity and force" (147). The tank/oven/Arab World also carries people who are abducted and detached from their roots, i.e., the Palestinians. They die quickly because they have already experienced the hell of being deported from Palestine in 1948. They should not agree to re-enter it and be misled by the same leadership. They accept the solidity of the iron tank rather than the solidity of their land. They agree to follow the direction--geographically--which leads them far from their land, believing that the desert will compensate the loss of their homeland.

When Abu Qais, the peasant, leaves his land, he carries a part of it with him: a symbolic relationship that makes him dream of a house surrounded with grapevines. His recollections of the olive and orange trees is what motivates him to make the fateful journey to Kuwait; the land has been his life, and when he has been forced to leave it, he recreates it or carries it in his memory, dreaming restlessly of returning. In this framework, land/homeland--which is entirely different from the desert--appears as a noble being that is superior to other beings, i.e., it is the symbol of stability and continuity, and it provides security and a life of dignity. Hence the opening of the text is best understood as the contrasting image of the desert, i.e., a juxtaposition of homeland vs. desert. The desert is a symbol that represents the ordeal of fire through which

the Palestinians must pass, and is depicted in its starkest guise; its presence contributes to the suspense which builds as the lorry races alone under the broiling August sun. However, the *land* is something else entirely:

Abu Qais rested his chest 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 the throbbing, as though the heart of the earth had been pushing its difficult way towards the light from the utmost depth 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:

'Its the sound of your own heart. You can hear it when you lay your chest close to the ground.'

What wicked nonsense! And the smell, then? The smell which, when he sniffed it, surged into his head and then poured down into his veins. Every time he breathed the scent of the earth, as he lay on it, he imagined that he was sniffing his wife's hair when she had just walked out of the bathroom, after washing with cold water. The very same smell, the same smell of a woman who had washed with cold water and covered his face with her hair while it was still damp. The same throbbing, like carrying a small bird tenderly in your hands. (9)

Abu Qais leaves all this and goes to the desert; thus the difference between the homeland and exile becomes the same as the difference between fertile land and the desert. Whereas fertile land is a metaphor for earthly paradise, the desert--as the novel reveals--is synonymous with death. If one term of a relation is defined through its antithesis, the barren burning desert is the opposite of the green and fertile land. The desert is the stage on which the tragedy of exile is performed: leaving one's homeland can lead to the desert, where an undignified death awaits. The desert is a severe punishment for leaving the land; that is why Abu Qais remembers the moisture of the land when he is under the desert sun, comparing it to both the paradise and to his wife. The primacy of the geographical factor can thus be comprehended.

Edward Said defines imperialism as "an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control" (1993:271). Hence the native colonized Palestinian's geographical identity must be searched for and restored since s/he has lost it to the colonizer. Said writes: "[t]he land is recoverable at first only through the imagination" (271)

From the beginning of the novel, everything indicates that the passengers are heading towards a dark destiny. But they remain largely oblivious to this. Asa'ad has already seen that "the desert is full of big rats which eat smaller rats." Their leadership, symbolized by Abu Khaizuran, does not truly unify them, nor does the lorry and the tank, nor the common wish to have a stable life, nor their commitment to their families. What does provide unity is the land. It is ironical that they die without being conscious that they have escaped from one kind of death--1948--to a new and worse death.

Their "leadership" abandons them without forgetting to take the money from their pockets, and takes Marwan's watch. After Abu Khaizuran throws their corpses on a heap of garbage:

[a]s he returned to the lorry and lifted one leg up, a sudden thought flashed into his mind. He stood rigid in his place, trying to do or say something. He thought of shouting, but immediately realized what a stupid idea that was [...] He thought that his head would explode. All the exhaustion which he felt suddenly rose to his head and began to hum in it, and so he put his head in his hands and began to pull his hair to expel the thought. But it was still there, huge and resounding, unshakable and inescapable [...] All at once he could no longer keep it within his head, and he dropped his hands to his sides and stared into the darkness with his eyes wide open.

The thought slipped from his mind and ran on to his tongue: 'Why didn't they knock on the sides of the tank?' He turned right around once, but he was afraid he would fall, so he climbed into his seat and leant his head on the wheel.

'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? {italics mine} (56)

By asking "why didn't *you* knock?", Abu Khaizuran, in fact, tries to comfort his conscience by blaming the dead passengers. However, by changing the pronoun "they" to "you", we, as readers, are shocked by the narrator's addressing us. That is, the question/cry is a question directed to all of us: "for how long will the revolution be silent?" And this is what the echo in the desert repeats: "Why? Why? Why?" The question is echoed in *our* minds. What is our answer? The dead have no answer, but the living might. And if we do not give a clear, sharp answer, the result will definitely be an undignified death.

The question the text ends with, essentially, indicates the longing for justice and dignity, since one's original land is a precondition for a decent life, free from alienation and exploitation. The intimate relationship between the Palestinians--especially peasants--and the land makes their separation tragic. Land is much more than just property. It is a mirror, an identity and a belonging. Land, in Abu Qais's memory, is not a mere landscape or a geographical space; it is a living being who has a "heart"; that is, land is a mirror of the human being, in as much as the human is a mirror of the land.

The question of resistance is the real focus of the text: resistance as a pre-condition for the existence of the human being who is worthy of his humanity and the homeland which grants him dignity and stability. Furthermore, the text is not only a condensed image of the Palestinian exile/hell, but also a rejection of the individualistic solutions that dominated the 1950's--solutions that called for confronting defeat in the 1948 war with silence and patience. His friend says to Abu Quais, "[i]n the last ten years you have done nothing but wait" (13). However, by hearing the desert echoing the question "Why? Why? Why?", one is compelled to offer an answer. In other words, the question invites a provocative answer: knock on the sides of the tank/grave; it is death; do not accept it; move and shout. Escape is death; there is no other alternative but confronting political reality.

Empathy is the natural response of anyone reading the novel, particularly Palestinians and other people struggling for a national identity. This empathy is what makes us as readers collaborators in the creation of the text: collaborators who are for a while led by the narrator into the inside of the tank until we see the grave swallowing us. We ask: when is our turn--our turn to die? It becomes clear, then, that the author/narrator does not rearrange the world, but rather shows us the importance and the necessity of rearranging it. The question, "when is our turn?" and our duty of answering this final question of the novel, is only the means of waking us up. The narrator describes reality in the harshest, starkest terms in order to make us more fully aware of it--even after we have become accustomed to its ugliness; this is the beginning of an awakening of our human will. This awakening of a strong human will gives us the ability to utter a big "NO": "No, we will not allow this to happen to us."

As a Palestinian, Kanafani seems to have felt a sharp conflict between reality and art. That is, in most respects he felt like any Palestinian, and any oppressed person--impotent, disabled, and unstable. But he allows his artistic self to have a free will, to make artistic decisions which relate reality and his art. In *Men In The Sun*, his realism brings readers at last to a garbage heap, the final resting place of the protagonists. This is because the reality out of which his art is created is one which chains the bodies and souls of Palestinians.

The only solution is to change this reality and create a new one--or rather to cross the thin line separating reality from art. Questions about whether the ending of the novel should have been different are, undoubtedly, illogical in the sense that it was impossible to create revolutionary Palestinians out of the three generations represented by Abu Qais, Asa'ad, and Marwan. These are generations that have never been born, politically speaking, but which have died in the womb. The only way for them to see the light is to get out of the tank/womb. The narrator, in fact, does not sympathize with the ambitions of these characters, but rather with their innocence. The lack of accurate political consciousness and the search for individual solutions contradicts the collective national problem the colonized have. Fear of drawing the attention of the outside world to their existence leads to the death of the colonized.

In her introduction to the novel, Hilary Kilpatrick writes: "The theme of tragedy brought about by human weakness and petty vices", and the series of false positions in which the characters are placed, or place themselves, are universal themes and motives. (1993:5) For example, Abu Qais's memories of the land he left behind and of his daughter's birth a month after the family had left its village could be matched with the stories of thousands of displaced persons who have been uprooted in many parts of the world (1993:3). The naive, barely educated Marwan, setting off into the unknown in order to support his family, "represents the economic refugees who throng the European capitals" (1993:3). By refusing to analyze the causes of the first flight of the tragic heroes from Palestine and indulge in accusations against specific groups, "[Kanafani] has given his characters--passive victims of events--universal [qualities] which [are] reinforced by the symbol of their banishment" and death (3). Thus Kanafani's self-criticism of some negative Palestinian values reflects a kind of national and historical consciousness that Palestinians, and all the colonized peoples, are in a position to do something about their own present and future.

The colonial "enlightenment" project cannot be comprehended without a historical understanding of the development of capitalism, and its inhuman manifestation in colonialism, from the industrial till the post-industrial stage, a stage at which there is no place for "Third World" peoples, according to those who defend neo-colonialism. However, the challenge presented by the early success of the Soviet Union and the victories of a series of national liberation movements as a whole after W.WII are factors which seem to support Kanafani's call for a radical change, and which weakens the neocolonial project. Following neocolonial prescriptions has led many "Third World" countries to corruption, low living standards, and national debts. Kanafani offers the alternative that takes the social and historical objective conditions into account, an alternative that asks the men in the sun--or rather the colonized--to depend on their powers in their relentless struggle against the existing order with all its injustice and the hegemony that "the New World Order" asserts over the Developing World.

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