

Probing Ghassan Kanafani's Committed Fiction: A Study of Two Novellas

Lana Waleed^[a], Fatima Muhaidat^{[b],*}

^[a]Graduate Student, Department of English Language and Literature, The Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan.

^[b]Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, The Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Ghassan Kanafani's commitment to the Palestinian cause is evident in his various works which handle the predicament of an exiled nation. This paper explores the exodus and its influence upon Palestinians in two of his novellas, *All That's Left to You* (1966) and *Returning to Haifa* (1969). These novellas reflect the fragile position and fractured existence of two Palestinian families experiencing the tragic circumstances of the exodus and its consequences. Leaving homeland under life threatening conditions in the hope of finding peace only leads to a life of misery and uncertainty in refugee camps. Being silenced and marginalized, the exiled are further overwhelmed by feelings of shame and guilt. Loss of land, houses, and family members entails loss of happiness, peace and honor. Tormented by such negative feelings, their losses and their poor living conditions, Kanafani's characters live in an unhealthy family atmosphere endangering their normal course of life, and rendering them emotionally disturbed. They find themselves disoriented, lonely, haunted by traumatic memories, and at a loss for words. In fact, the exodus results in distorted sense of identity, disruptions of their family bonds as well as their normal connections to time, space and culture. Neither time nor the boundless horizon seems to bring hope or change for the better. Siding with the oppressed, dispossessed and displaced and speaking for them reflect Kanafani's love of justice, devotion, and care for the underprivileged.

Key words: Ghassan Kanafani; *All That's Left to You*; *Returning to Haifa*; Exile; Fractured family life; Literary commitment; Arabic literature

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INTRODUCTION

Like hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, Kanafani witnessed the exodus of the Palestinian people and their scattering as refugees in different areas in the Arab world. Roger, in his introduction to the translation of the novella *All That's Left to You*, explains that Kanafani lived as a refugee in Lebanon, then he travelled to Syria, and he worked in Kuwait for five years, and after that he returned back to Beirut where he was assassinated (p. x). His writings exemplify committed literature. According to Klemm, this literature was in vogue in some Arab countries like Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq in the postcolonial era (2000, p.51). In this regard, Kilpatric indicates that "Kanafani's commitment to his cause provides the inspiration for writing of a very high quality" (1976, p.16). Like other writers who "address themselves to the various aspects of their quest for land and national identity from Palestinian diaspora" (p.ix), Kanafani never slackens his efforts to provide insightful accounts of the Palestinian losses which have had far-reaching human, social, political and cultural implications. Some of his novels can be considered as eye-witness accounts to what happened in 1948 and the following years. He immerses himself in writings handling the challenges, fears, hopes, ambitions as well as the illnesses of the exiled. With the loss of their homeland, Palestinians lose inner peace, and they find no consolation in the world around them

including the whole Arab world which seems wrapped up in an atmosphere of defeat. Kanafani lives and dies for the sake of restoring peace and stability for his nation.

Manifestations of Kanafani's literary commitment to a national cause can be discerned in different ways. For example, his novellas *All That's Left to You* (1966; trans., 1990) and *Returning to Haifa* (1969; trans., 2000) [respectively shortened into *All That* and *Returning* throughout the rest of this article], were written more than fifteen years after a large number of Palestinians had lost their homeland and had moved to live in exile. The long time that had elapsed did not make Kanafani forget the suffering of the victims of war and military/political conflicts. Their pain and losses were rather a focal point in his fiction which could be seen as "part of his participation in his people's struggle" (Allaham, 2009, p.50). This article discusses Kanafani's skill in conveying the historical dimension and psychosocial impact of being driven out of the home under coercive measures. In the following sections, the researchers will focus on the portrayal of the exodus, separation from family members, shaken sense of identity, and disruptions of connections to time, space, and culture.

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: ATMOSPHERE OF THE EXODUS

The nation's journey of loss and deprivation takes place with large numbers of Palestinians leaving their homes in panic while their cities being under fire. Kanafani describes in detail the way Palestinians tried to avoid mass death under such circumstances. They were forced to move toward the port where boats were waiting to carry them to safe places. The chaos of the situation made panic-stricken family members lose each other as there was no time or place to pick them up all on the same boat. The boats fled in various directions: Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Those Palestinians who fled to sea became refugees in their own homeland and new cities. Overwhelmed by feelings of loss and defeat, they found their life dark, dull and meaningless as they became helpless victims in a volatile area. Although several decades have passed since the exodus of 1948, conflicts in certain areas in Palestine speak of "a struggle in a bitterly contested landscape" (Selwyn, 2001, p.227). Residents of such landscapes are likely to suffer from the consequences of political and/or military conflicts which can force them into exile. In fact, drawing on the political philosopher Eric Voegelin, Rossbach indicates that exile is triggered by power struggle including "the rise, the expansion, the decline as well as the collapse of empires" (2008, p.780). As for the Palestinian exiles, they were victims of the violence that concurred with the termination of the British Mandate for Palestine in 1948. Studying Kanafani's *All That*, Ouyang starts her argument by stating that, "Perhaps no

single catastrophe in recent history can rival that which befell the Palestinians, who have been forced into life under occupation, or out of their homeland and into exile since 1948" (1998, p.223). Ouyang's sympathetic remark conveys the suffering the Palestinians have endured for long.

In *Returning*, Kanafani touches upon the historical context of the exodus in "Morning, Wednesday, April 21, 1948. Haifa, the city, was not expecting anything, in spite of the fact that it was filled with dark tension" (p.153). While setting does not suggest imminent danger, it refers to a condition of gloom, suspense and anxiety in one of the Palestinian cities less than one month before the withdrawal of the Arab armies from that area. The surprise comes when "Mortar shells flew across the city's center, pelting the Arab quarters" (Ibid, p.153). While trying to drive his car home to pick up his wife Safiyya and their baby Khaldun and find a safe place to resort to, the protagonist Said finds "himself pushed by an unseen force toward one road only, the road to the coast" (Ibid, p.153). The same scenario seems to have led the wife to the coast as she rushes out to look for her husband among the flood of cars passing by their house. For them, reaching the coast becomes like reaching the point of no return. When it is too late, they realize they have left their baby behind. Hopelessly, they try to go back home, but they couldn't. Thus, the parents' loss of homeland is compounded by the loss of their son. In Kanafani's narrative it is obvious that Said and Safiyya are unwillingly pushed to the coast as other ways, roads and alleys are closed by barricades and armed men. Put differently, the fleeing crowds seem to have been victims of a plan causing them to panic and leading them to the port where boats carried them away from home.

Further historical details appear in, "the British still controlled the city and this whole situation should have taken place in approximately three weeks, when the British would begin to withdraw in accordance with the date they had fixed" (Ibid, pp.153-154). Including these details gives credibility and a feel of reality to Kanafani's fiction which asserts the statement that the Arabic novel "is driven by its own impulse to simply tell stories and write history" (Ouyang, 2012, p.25). Elements of fiction and history are adeptly combined in *Returning* to orchestrate an outstanding tale of national loss and struggle.

Some Palestinians left their country after being told that their journey would last for a short time. Not prepared for or thinking of long absence from home, "They just packed up some of their meagre possessions as quickly as possible" (2011, Hamdi, p.32). They left almost everything they had owned behind as they thought they would be back home a few days later. Running for their lives, Palestinians relate the hazardous conditions of their departure including hearing "sounds of shots and explosions" (*Returning*, p.153), and news about massacres in neighboring areas. Referring to Deir Yassin massacre,

Kotaishová explains “The consequences of this massacre were vast and gave rise to a large Palestinian exodus; thousands of frightened Palestinians fled their homeland” (2007, p.32). Under such circumstances, people are likely to get disoriented and lose composure. Dyb argues that “appraisals of threats may induce immediate emotional reactions of terror, horror, and helplessness.... The immediate cognitive reaction to danger may include thoughts or fantasies of altering the precipitating events” (2008, p.64). Decisions made in such a tumultuous emotional atmosphere are likely to be regretted or reconsidered. Responding naturally does not guarantee good solutions in the long run. The exiled started to feel that they may have miscalculated or exaggerated the possible danger. Thus, they found themselves tormented by feelings of guilt and shame for running away and leaving their homeland and houses for others to occupy them. Such negative feelings were triggered and fostered by the humiliation and poor living conditions in exile. Paradoxically, refugees and exiles who ran away for their lives started to wish they had died at home. Death started to appear better than living outside one’s homeland.

2. SEPARATION FROM FAMILY MEMBERS

The scattered and fragmented life that the Palestinians have suffered from is very obvious in *All That*. Kanafani uses different font types and bold lines to separate the five characters’ thoughts and ideas. At the same time, these thoughts are linked to each other, or sometimes they are separated from each other like two straight lines. At times, the last point for one idea marks a starting point for other completely different ideas.

The loss of family ties during the exodus left many Palestinians emotionally scarred throughout their lives. In *All That*, Hamid and his sister Maryam got separated from their mother as they could not all get on the same boat. The siblings were taken to Gaza while the mother was taken to Jordan. The loss of their mother was preceded by the loss of their father who was killed in the war. Lacking parental support and protection makes them feel lonely. According to Ouyang, “Both Hamid and Maryam are anxious about their separation from their mother, their separation from each other, and their fate” (1998, pp.227-228). Here, family members can never be sure about continuing life together as dangers loom large on the horizon. Hamid keeps saying to his sister Maryam: “If only your mother was here! Something he would repeat whenever they quarrelled, when they laughed, when she was in pain, when she didn’t know how to cook, when they fired him from job...” (Kanafani, 1990, p.2). For sure, Hamid thinks that his mother’s presence would have been of great help to them. Repeating this sentence shows that there is something missing, broken

or empty inside them. Their mother is not there to fill an emotional void while they search around for the meaning of life. The gap of loneliness in Hamid’s life is obvious as “his mother had never been there” (Ibid, p. 3). While relating the influence of torture, violence and exile upon their victims, Blackwell maintains that “The normal rules and expectations of everyday life have been changed. The historically predictable conduct of social life has been replaced by violence, terror, and the consequently pervasive sense of insecurity” (1993, p.5). As for Maryam and Hamid, the war, exodus, and exile have deprived them of their right to lead a normal life with their parents. Hamid’s grief and dissatisfaction make him “on fire, tasting a deep bitterness right down to the pit of his stomach” and he keeps “wearing that wounded smile” (Kanafani, 1990, p.3). The exiled may find it difficult to wear a natural smile expressing real happiness. Hamid has had no hand in their tragedy of separation from their mother. However, sometimes the situation causes him an inner conflict as he feels guilty for leaving his mother get on another boat with men unknown to them. He tries to allay his grief by attributing his behaviour to his young age and the need to accompany his sister. Inner conflicts also pervade Maryam’s mind. She becomes an easy victim to the temptations of the frivolous Zakaria. Her affair breaks her heart and leads to more fragmentation and emotional pain to herself and her brother. She herself refers to the impact of her affair as a silent collapse that has destroyed her body and left her shaken to the very core of her reality.

Another example of the unhealthy family life in exile can be discerned in the experience of Hamid’s mother. Instead of hope or dreams of living happily with her children during old age, she tries to secure herself by getting married. All she hopes for is to find someone who buys her a shroud and a grave when she dies. This shows that she is hopeless and waiting for death. Her feelings show the narrow horizon available for the exiled.

In *Returning*, Said and Safiyya suffer a lot after leaving their house. They travel from one camp to another and from one hut to another. Safiyya’s emotional pain becomes an everyday nuisance she feels “in every look she cast at her children and at him and herself” (*Returning*, p.152). According to Saloul, “Palestinian exile constitutes an entangled spatiotemporal condition of forced travel and undesired movement” (2012, p.104). As for Said, the painful “past was upon him, sharp as knife” (*Returning*, p.152). The parents try to avoid calling the name of their abandoned child for twenty years. They think that when their child is back they will be happy, but the reality devastates them. They hesitate to enter their own house and they feel bitter and strange. The house does not belong to them anymore; it even makes no difference for them to find their son alive or not. Father’s loss of compassion and connection to his son appears as Said “wanted to get up and leave. Nothing mattered to him anymore. Whether Khaldun was alive or dead made no

difference” (Ibid., p.165). The parents want to return to the past as its horrific events seem more merciful than the present. They feel shocked as nothing seems to happen according to their plans or expectations. Instead of having a happy family reunion, Said thinks of a “bitter defeat he had at least twice in his time” (Ibid., p.152) upon seeing his son after twenty years of separation. The first defeat is the parents’ loss of their land and child while the second one is meeting their abandoned child. This meeting does not make Saffiyya and Said feel better. They are further distressed and their hearts ache as they see their son wearing a military uniform. Devastated by what she has seen, Saffiyya starts sobbing and the sound of her sobs is prisoned inside her “like the creaking chair of an uninvolved observer” (Ibid., p.180). Said pretends to be more courageous; he tries to have an argument with Khaldun, but his courage falls apart as he gets no favourable response. He laughs hysterically to relieve himself. He also tries to calm himself down by having a cigarette while misery and silence rule the scene;

Said laughed heartily. And with that explosive laughter he felt as if he was pushing out all the pain and tension and fear and anguish in his chest. He wanted to keep on laughing and laughing until the entire world was turned upside down or until he fell asleep or died or raced out to his car (Ibid, p.180)

The bitter reality makes Said desperate. Not only does his son reject his parents, but he also considers them “on the other side” (Ibid., p.180). The son treats his real parents as enemies. Said’s shock appears as he “rose heavily. Only now did he feel tired, that he had lived his life in vain. These feelings gave way to an unexpected sorrow, and he felt himself on the verge of tears” (Ibid., p.182). Said regrets anything that he “believed the opposite in for twenty years” (Ibid., p.183).

Khaldun, or Dov as the new Jewish parents called him is “youthful but tired” (Ibid., p.178). He is shocked by the fact that Miriam and her husband are not his biological parents. In fact, they are his enemies. But those enemies raised him up, educated him, and looked after him while his true parents left him and ran away to save their lives. He keeps asking himself “how could a father and mother leave their five-month-old son behind and run off? How could a mother and father not his own raise him and educate him for twenty years?” (Ibid., p.182). When Miriam introduced him to his parents he was staggered by the unexpected news. However, he confirmed a former account probably given to him by his foster mother. He insisted that he did not “know any mother [except Miriam]. As for my father, he was killed in the Sinai eleven years ago. I know no other than the two of you” (Ibid., p.179). For him, the minutes are motionless. Khaldun rejects the blood and flesh relation as he considers it a lie and he thinks man is a case either won or lost. Khaldun, as a person who carries the oppressor’s ideology, ignores the human side of his condition. His

main concern is to get benefits regardless of the harm that could be done to others. Khaldun rejects his parents and thinks that their return will not change anything. He does not mind killing his real brother Khalid or even one of his biological parents. He does not have any sympathy towards them, letting his mother cry and his father undergo a shock. This falling apart of family relations adds to characters’ suffering.

Kanafani also uses Khaldun as an eye witness to what happened to the Palestinian cities and people who remained in Palestine during the occupation and after that. The people who stayed in Palestine adopted the Israeli lifestyle. They were given Israeli ID cards and were called Arab-Israelis. These people are “always torn between their national identity as Palestinians and their identity as citizens of the sovereign state of Israel” (Keren, 2014, p.126), and their identity is forged into a new one. The abandoned son represents the abandoned land and heritage. At the same time, Kanafani’s idea of parents leaving their child behind alludes to the Palestinians’ mistake of leaving their houses and land which have been easily occupied by the newcomers. Khaldun is given a new name Dov, like Palestinian cities which have also been given new names to divest them from their identity and control them completely.

3. SHAKEN SENSE OF IDENTITY

The identity of the exiled is threatened as a result of losing their land and houses. They are usually marginalized. They live in tents or small rooms without cement roofs, and none of them is allowed to cross the borders of the camps. Basic rights to decent life in convenient places and freedom of travel are unattainable. According to Aguila, “an exile is someone who has been uprooted for political reasons from that which is permanent, familiar, even affective: the nation, the family, one’s culture and social group, and other symbols that partly define identity” (1998, p.9). The massive losses, dislocations and dissociations the exiled experience can lead to negative thoughts about themselves and the world as a whole. They may even suffer from low self-esteem and self-blame as they start to feel that they deserve the pain they have brought upon themselves by leaving homeland. They may blame themselves for not rising up to the circumstances by defending their country even if the matter may have cost them their lives.

Shaken sense of identity can be further noticed while exiles are looking for opportunities outside the homeland. Their dependence on the sources of other countries may cause them feelings of shame. Hamid claims: “and each one of us carrying his personal shame” (Kanafani, 1990, p.29). This shame makes them insignificant like an isolated air bubble disappearing in the vacuum. The feeling of inferiority makes them helpless when they are

insulted. They feel incapable of fighting back or taking revenge; Hamid meditates, "Perhaps it would be better to spend your life on your knees here, your forehead bent to the ground, waiting for some big foot to kick you; then you will jump up, burning with shame" (Ibid, p.28). Exiles are often exposed to degradation in their daily lives. Silence becomes a way to handle their problems. Billig (2004) claims that "Freud came to suspect that the denials and the silences indicated hidden thoughts" (p.20), and these hidden thoughts turn to pain. Maryam gets very upset over her brother's decision to leave Gaza, but she makes no attempt to make him change his mind. She utters no single word to stop him. He expected her to call his name the moment he left, but that never happened. Overwhelmed by the shame he feels because of his sister's sexual affair, Hamid also resorts to silence when he deals with Zakaria. Suffocating indignation renders Hamid silent. He even feels the whole refugee camp immersed in black silence. According to O'Neil and Harindanath, "The right to speak, be heard and recognized are central aspects of "social justice" [quotation in the original text] and feed into cultural politics" (2006, p.44). The silence of the exiled speaks of their helplessness, and having no voice reflects the harm and injustices done to them. Inability to take action or even express their thoughts in verbal language adds to the darkness of their exile.

4. DISRUPTIONS OF NORMAL CONNECTIONS TO TIME, SPACE AND CULTURE

Relationship with time, place, and culture plays a significant role in shaping people's identity and wellbeing. In normal conditions, the passage of time is a decisive factor in deciding one's success and achievement. Building on the past and utilizing the present potential in order to have a better future are common concerns in people's daily life. When this bond is fractured, individuals as well as communities are likely to suffer. Similarly, uprooting people from their homeland and disrupting their sense of belonging to a certain place can lead to serious problems hindering normal human life and progress. Referring to the influence of exile upon the "Palestinian identity", Saloul explains that it "has been persistently and systematically unmapped out of time and space since 1948" (2012, p.2). The Palestinians seem to find themselves outside the domain of normal human condition or even outside the whole cycle of human life as a result of the exodus.

4.1 Distorted Perception of Time

Kanafani uses the wall clock which looks like a wooden bier in *All That* to show the relationship between Palestinians and time. The passing moments make them aware of one single possibility, coming closer to their

end. Tragically, sense of loss and disappointment seem to envelop every aspect of their life. They keep waiting and watching the clock which hung in front of everybody's sight. Hamid, Maryam, Zakaria and even their aunt, who died in front of the clock, keep looking at it imagining it as a bier waiting for the corpses of the dead. But the seconds are too long, moving slowly, enlarging their agony and making them wait for nothing. Every passing second scares them, making them feel further and further detached from their dream and hope for a normal life. The only thing that is familiar to them is death. The passage of time reflects their utter despair.

4.2 Disrupted Connections to Space

Hamid's anger and dissatisfaction with life in exile keeps him from establishing meaningful connections with his surroundings. He is disturbed by Zakaria's betrayal, his mother's absence, and his sister's sexual affair. As a result, he finds it intolerable to stay in the camp. He decides to leave his sister immediately after she gets married to Zakaria. He is in the desert like the black bird that he can see; "the black bird still circling aimlessly" (*All That*, p.13). Hamid aimlessly wanders in the desert, not knowing what to do. Even when he captures the Israeli soldier he does not have any idea what to do what to do. Hamid says; "that he wasn't harbouring any concealed plan, and that if necessary we'd sit there until...until what?" (Ibid., p.47). Leading a life full of disappointments, anxiety and confusion make Hamid feel disgraced. As a result, he is unable to stay with his sister under the same roof. At the same time, he has no idea about dealing with his enemy. A life of purpose does not exist in his experience. He suffers from emptiness which prevents him from thinking in a proper way. He ends up incapable of dealing with family members as well as enemies.

The desert is a barren area lacking the essentials of everyday life. Such areas are usually connected with death. As for Hamid, he seems to find hope and consolation in the desert with its "breathing in an audible whistle" (Ibid, p.5). For him, the situation in the desert is no worse than the ugly harsh life in a refugee camp. His misery renders him indifferent to any further danger he may come across. So, "nothing in this vast expanse had the power to shock him; it was a world open to everything, and whatever the sound came to him could only be small, clear and familiar" (Ibid., p.5). Hamid's pain makes him forget the vast expansion of the featureless space in the desert and its hazards. He does not mind risking his life by crossing the desert alone. While conveying the tragic experience in exile, Kanafani warns of the consequences of leaving the exiled alone without any support. Related to this point, Brodwin refers to two models of exile experience. The exiles may be integrated into the society they join after leaving homeland. However, this assimilation or adaptation may not always take place and the condition

of the exiled may be that of “marginality and racialized stigma” (2008, pp.55-57). Kanafani’s portrayal of the desert that turns men into bones suggests the catastrophic consequences of ignoring the human rights of exiles.

4.3 Threatened Cultural Values

In the absence of normal family life resulting from her father’s death and separation from her mother in the exodus, Maryam appears as a woman desperately seeking material security. She tries to find it with Zakaria who has an extramarital relationship with her. Her marriage to this man brings her neither security nor happiness. Her affair rather brings shame to the family. Her brother could not stand the situation and decides to leave and face the unknown. Maryam keeps thinking about her brother. Painful repetitive memories make her cry without significant reasons; “and suddenly began to cry for no reason at all- or perhaps for everything for which I had no name” (*All That*, p.30). She seems at loss for words. She is incapable of expressing herself and her worries. She is rather stunned as she realises the opportunism of her husband. Rather than being a supportive companion, he just takes advantage of her loneliness and fragile position. Maryam’s weaknesses exemplify the damage caused by life in exile.

Maryam’s tragedy intensifies as her husband asks her to abort her baby. He thinks that this baby will ruin their relationship. In other words, Zakaria seems to perceive Maryam no more than an object of his sexual desire. His thinking reflects his moral corruption and adoption of religiously and socially unacceptable ideas. It seems that Kanafani conveys the deterioration that occurred to the exiled as a result of their separation from the homeland. This separation can lead to indecency, selfishness, and strange patterns of thinking. Zakaria’s behavior illustrates the rift between the exiled and their culture.

CONCLUSION

In his committed fiction, Kanafani reflects the detrimental consequences of political and military conflicts upon individuals, their families as well as their connections to their surrounding environment. He skilfully articulates historical dimensions of the exodus. The unenviable condition of the exiled is obvious. For instance, they appear as victims of the terror and chaos of conditions they have no control over. At the same time, these victims start to be tormented by feelings of guilt and shame for leaving home and other belongings behind. In addition, Kanafani points out psychological concomitants of a humiliating experience of exile with victims preferring death to a life lacking honor and dignity. In fact, the narratives of *All That* and *Returning* reflect a deep understanding of the vulnerabilities of an exiled nation. The unbearable situation makes Hamid risk his life and takes to the desert alone. He is also willing to cross

borders guarded by enemies. In addition, Zakaria’s strange ideas and Maryam’s decision to kill him show more setbacks. The influence of the separation of family members from each other also appears in Khaldun’s denial of his real parents and considering them dead. Furthermore, father-son relationship seems to be affected as a result of this separation; towards the end of *Returning*, Said is no longer afraid of the possibility that his sons Khalid and Khaldun might face each other as enemies in battle as a result of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict. In brief, in both novellas, not only have the exodus and exile destroyed individuals from the inside e.g. their identity, but they have also disrupted their connections to the world around them including their families, culture, and sense of time as well as sense of space.

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