



REMEMBERING GHASSAN KANAFANI, OR HOW A NATION WAS BORN OF STORY TELLING

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This essay on Ghassan Kanafani—militant, political writer and essayist, literary innovator, and preeminent Palestinian novelist—is another in what JPS hopes will become an ongoing, if occasional, series foregrounding individuals (some known, others unknown to the outside world or forgotten) who embody some dimension of the Palestinian Resistance in the early years of its existence. Several such pieces have appeared in recent issues of JPS, notably “Two Portraits in Resistance,” commemorating two remarkable figures who left other lives to serve the movement, published in JPS 164, and the landmark 1996 interview with Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, published in JPS 165.

*Though less of a household name than the slightly younger Darwish, Kanafani, assassinated in 1972 at age thirty-six by a Mossad bomb planted in his automobile, was known during his lifetime in almost equal measure for his political work and writings and for the novels and short stories that today constitute his enduring legacy. In this evocative remembrance of Kanafani written on the fortieth anniversary of his death, Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury treats the two strands, literary and revolutionary, as inextricably intertwined, two sides of the same coin. The piece was originally published in Arabic in JPS’s sister publication, *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya*, no. 92, autumn 2012, and translated for JPS by Maia Tabet.*

MAHMOUD DARWISH ONCE TOLD ME a story of how in 1972 Kamal Nasir,¹ after reading Darwish’s elegy to Ghassan Kanafani, had declaimed in semi-tragic jest, “What more can a poet write after this? What is there left for you to say when my time comes?” Nasir didn’t quote the famous lines from the *Mu’allaqat* where Antara laments to his beloved Abla that “no part of the garment remained for him to patch,”² but deep down he knew that elegy would become a permanent feature of Palestinian literature. When Nasir met his own death the following year in the “Verdun massacre,” which also

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took the lives of Kamal Adwan and Mohammad Yusif al-Najjar,³ Darwish penned the poem “Palestinian Wedding”—and elegy shed its old garments to become love, passion, and hope.⁴

Forty years have passed since Kanafani’s assassination. His absence has become muted; he has gained his rightful place in the landscape of our spirit where place and non-place are intertwined. It is no accident that Edward Said titled his memoir *Out of Place*, for those three words encapsulate the polarity of home and exile that is at the heart of the Palestinian experience. Exile shapes the notion of the absent place—Palestine—whether in the imagination, the choice of words, or the will to freedom. And in the context of the Nakba, to endure is to recreate the possibilities of life and reformulate the meaning of death, such that it becomes part of life instead of its antithesis.

The notion of place is particularly important in Kanafani’s work. His novellas, *Men in the Sun* (1962)⁵ and *All That’s Left to You* (1966),⁶ not only reclaim the name of the place he figuratively refers to as “the sad land of oranges,” but also delineate the boundaries of the Arab space that excluded Palestinians. Palestine becomes an intellectual and political reality in the symbolic construction of the two novellas which also reveal how borders shape destiny. Thus, in *Men in the Sun*, the Jordanian-Iraqi border is a terrifying, rat-infested desert nightmare, while the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border becomes the locus of a soundless death in infernal heat. In *All That’s Left to You*, the Negev Desert between Gaza and Jordan—a place where nothing but the glint of death survives—is the silent meeting ground of the Palestinian protagonist and the Israeli soldier. The common and defining feature of the two novellas is thus the desert, at once the signifier of aridity, heat, mirage, and death, and the expression of the political and military boundaries that keep the Palestinian out of his (Arab) place.

Ghassan Kanafani was a member of the central committee of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the founder/editor of its much read and widely quoted weekly newspaper *Al-Hadaf*. Before the PFLP was established, he had been active in the Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM).⁷ But the young militant’s political and intellectual embrace of Arab nationalism collided head-on with the writer’s search for his Palestinian identity—something that had been lost in the process that transformed a once unbroken Arab geographical continuum into discrete nation-states with borders drawn in the sand.

“First he has to cross our borders, then theirs, then theirs again, before he finally arrives at the frontier with Jordan . . . and between those four, a hundred deaths are to be had in the desert . . .” So says Zakaria when describing the journey Hamid must make in order to be reunited with his mother in Jordan. That is how *All That’s Left to You* recapitulates *Men in the Sun*, with the border crossing representing the moment of impact with death and the desert.

For me, these two novellas foreshadow the man: in them, the writer transcends the notion of borders and goes unflinchingly to meet death. In his subsequent works written after the emergence of the Resistance, by contrast, he is in search of a homeland, both actual and spiritual. Thus, *Returning to Haifa* (1970)⁸ is an exploration of a new notion of Palestine not predicated on the yearning for a lost past, but on a kind of social realism for which Kanafani found inspiration in Maxim Gorky's⁹ work. It is under the same influence that he wrote the short story *On Men and Rifles* (1968) and created the Palestinian mother archetype in *Umm Sa'ad* (1969).

I am convinced that the border construct was central to redefining Palestinian identity after the Nakba. For a Palestinian, there was no other place than Palestine. The Arab nationalist vision of recovering the lost homeland through concerted military action by the Arab states ended in borders that spelled death for the Palestinians, literally and metaphorically. Only after the 1967 Arab defeat did it become clear that the Palestinians' only alternative was to fight the occupation and rely on their own efforts in the resistance struggle.

If we look at the two novellas as writings about borderlands, it is clear that their symbolic dimensions—the three Palestinian generations, the persona of the driver, and the water tanker in *Men in the Sun*; the search for the Mother, the traitor (Zakaria) who subjugates his wife Maryam in *All That's Left to You*—are not mere narrative devices but are inherent to the story of Palestine itself. In other words, there *is* no identity outside the framework of the relationship to the land.

Sometime back in 1999, I spent an evening with the late Jordanian novelist, Mu'nis al-Razzaz.¹⁰ Our discussions were always warm and earnest; inevitably they turned to the "old Palestinian days" in Beirut. At some point in the course of our conversation about novel writing, Kanafani, and my own *Bab al-Shams* (*Gate of the Sun*), published a few years earlier, al-Razzaz remarked: "Don't forget that Kanafani died young. We are older now than he was when he was killed." I'd never really thought of that before: Kanafani died at thirty-six. Today, forty years later, Kanafani is *still* thirty-six, the age of my children. Thus, the father is now a son, simply because he disappeared before his time.

Kanafani, the boy from Galilee, left Akka (Acre) as a twelve-year-old refugee and spent his all too-brief years—in Damascus, Kuwait, and finally Beirut—searching for home with his words. The man, cut down in the Beirut suburb of Hazmieh on 8 July 1972, the fragments of his pulverized body splattered across the pavement, left behind hundreds of pages in the fleeting book of life. He had outwitted time with his writing and jousting with death in his struggle with diabetes; he devoted his days to political activism within the ANM and the PFLP, and in the hours that remained he created

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the story of Palestine from the tatters of a homeland. He took his men into the sun before they could discover their rifles; he recounted the story of the sad land of oranges so that his protagonist Saeed S. might return to Haifa, and he taught us that it was our job to reckon up the losses.

He who writes the losses also writes the dreams. How did this boy from Akka, this young Damascene and later Beirut, succeed in turning dark despair into the ferment of hope? The secret lay in his intense awareness of the fleeting nature of time. He constantly battled to keep his diabetes at bay, but it was his love of life that fashioned the writer, the lover, and the fearless fighter. He transformed his duel with death into an affirmation of life, and helped forge a nation from his words.

His novels are unlike others of his time, not so much in the sense that they don't tell a story, but in the way they encapsulate rather than narrate, condense rather than draw out. It is as if Kanafani began at the end in order to reach the beginning, as if the tale were a stolen moment, as if an entire character could be stripped down to a single utterance before disappearing. Umm Saad, pondering what lies ahead for the Palestinians at a time that is equal parts disaster and renewal, remarks that "Not all deaths are created equal." Hamid is equally succinct when he says that loss is "all that is left to you," providing the title for the novella of which he is the protagonist.

What appears to be missing in Kanafani's works is what lends them an irresistible charm. It's as if he thinks that by hurrying the tale he can stop Palestine from seeping away like water through our fingers. The intensity of his desire to achieve a distillation of life probably owed something to the courage and impetuosity of youth. This enabled him to leap across the arc of time, enveloping it with his words; it is this leap that continues to make his writing relevant to us today.

When I interviewed Emile Habibi¹¹ in Prague in 1980 for the first issue of the literary journal *Al-Karmil*,¹² I was confounded by the writer's animosity toward Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*. It was only after Habibi died and his grave was inscribed with his chosen epitaph—"Emile Habibi: Remained in Haifa"—that I finally understood why the story had bothered him. His complaint focused on the story's protagonist, Dov, born to Arab parents as "Khalidun" and accidentally left behind in the chaos of the flight from Haifa in 1948; twenty years later, when the 1967 war temporarily erased the Green Line, the couple returns to Haifa to find their old apartment in the hope of tracing their son. They encounter him there, now an Israeli soldier, the adopted son of the Polish Holocaust survivors who found him. But Habibi's animus really didn't have much to do with his reading of Dov/Khalidun. The real issue for him was about who would write the ultimate Palestinian story: the man who had remained in Haifa, or the man who had been driven from Akka.

During that interview, I tried to convince Habibi that Dov could be considered another facet of his own protagonist, Saeed Abi-Nahs al-Mutasha'el

(the Pessoptimist).¹³ I argued that it was entirely conceivable that the young Israeli might find himself imprisoned, and that just as Saeed, the collaborator had been transformed into a militant after meeting the *fida'i* at Shatta prison, so might Dov have been transformed by a similar experience. Habibi's features darkened visibly and he blew his cigarette smoke right into my face. "No," was all he said. I dropped the subject, because when the man took off his satirist's mask and donned the politician's mantle, discussion was futile.

Today, as I remember my conversation with Habibi in Prague and recall al-Razzaz's remark about Kanafani's youth, I am convinced that the contest over who would tell the Palestinian story was not unlike the internal dialogue that a father (who has survived) might pursue with the son (who has died). I didn't say so at the time, perhaps because I was younger then than Kanafani at his death, and propriety dictated silence. I had wanted to say that the Palestinian story would have dozens of different narratives all written in different places and from diverse perspectives: it would not be hostage to a single, closed narrative.

The destiny of the young man from Akka who died a martyr was that his fiction would usher in the future. Kanafani's writing broke with tradition, foreshadowing a new style then on the point of emerging. With their short, clipped sentences, their economy and austerity of expression, his novellas had the immediacy of theatrical space—as if the writer had started at the end of the story because he was pressed for time and lacked the patience for elaboration. Kanafani taught me that writing isn't just a creative act, but also a way of life. His own life was a constant struggle—with writing, with Palestine, with love, with smoking, with drinking, and, eventually, with death. Striving to reach the best that was in himself, he ignored his illness, and any moment he seized was equivalent to an entire lifetime.

There are two circumstances in which the commemoration of death takes precedence over that of life. One is death by martyrdom, where a life is knowingly offered up to a cause. In such instances, we remember the person in his final moment, for death is the martyr's last word. This is the case for 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam and 'Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni, for 'Ali Abu Tawq and Abu Jihad,¹⁴ and for the thousands of other men and women who gave their lives for Palestine. The second circumstance is the death of a writer or poet, the finality of which allows the literary work to reach completion: the text is finally free of its creator. Henceforth, it belongs exclusively to the reader, and it is the text's interpretation that completes what the writer started.

In both these circumstances, death marks a new beginning. In the first, the martyr claims his place in the arc of suffering that envelops the Palestinians, and is born anew to become part of the collective history of his people. In the case of the writer, death liberates his text and allows it to continue its journey toward becoming a collective work. For authorship does not belong solely to the individual writer who, in a sense, only draws

the preliminary sketch. The text is completed by the reader who brings to full fruition the words the author has handed on. The lives of poems and of a novel's characters are sustained by successive generations of readers who, in a sense, recreate the work with every reading. Thus, with the martyr we celebrate completion, and with the writer incompleteness; in both instances we face new beginnings wrought by death.

It is a rare occurrence when martyr and writer are one and the same. In the annals of recent literary history, the example of Federico Garcia Lorca¹⁵ comes to mind. The poet and dramatist from Granada who was killed by Spain's fascists and the Palestinian author who was murdered by the fascists of Zionism mirror one another. For both, the end marked a new dawn, as writer fused with text, life merged with death, and the signifiers became one with the signified. In Lorca's case, there is no ambiguity in the picture: the Spanish Civil War soon ended, and after Franco was gone and Spain was liberated from the grip of fascism, Spaniards fully reclaimed their poet and his martyrdom faded. Not so for Kanafani: it is far more difficult to bridge the gap between completion in martyrdom and incompleteness in art when the conflict is ongoing. And the Palestine conflict, among the longest in modern history, has continued, with periods of quiet, for over a century; since the early 1920s it has been the defining feature of Palestinian life. Thus, the image of Kanafani the martyr is superimposed on that of Kanafani the writer, since it was the martyr who catapulted the writer to his death, and the writer who articulated the martyr's image with his words.

Had Kanafani lived, we might have asked him how we could finish the story cut short by his death and build on his finished works. It is that question that informs my reading of *Men in the Sun*. Abu Khuzayran's last words in the novella, shouted into the desert void after he disposes of the bodies of the men who had suffocated in his truck, are: "Why didn't they knock against the walls of the tanker? Why? Why?" In the current condition of our Arab world, the question must be turned on its head. The Palestinians are knocking, not just with their fists, but with their lives and bullet-riddled bodies and the uprooted trees of their lands. Who would dare to claim that "the Palestinians are not 'knocking'?" Wouldn't it be more accurate to ask, "Why do you not hear?" Or rather, "Why do you pretend to be deaf when you hear the knocking?"

Palestinians talk a great deal about memory but are unable to give it new form, not because they lack imagination, but because their experience of reality is trapped within. The Nakba is neither over nor complete, and writing is like a small death; it is akin to partaking of death. That is why the writer becomes part of the vast expanse of suffering that surrounds Palestine, and prolongs its history beyond what the pen can sustain.

In death and in life, as well as in his writing, Kanafani encapsulates this Palestinian moment that feels like an eternity. But the splattered remains of his body upon meeting with death suggest a new form of writing—one

where, in anticipation of the homeland, the words must suffice to spell nationhood, and the sum of the parts is made whole.

ENDNOTES

1. Palestinian poet and politician, 1924–73. Born in Birzeit, Palestine, Nasir had been a professor of Arabic literature and a member of Jordan's parliament before his expulsion from the West Bank after the Israeli occupation in 1967. He was elected to the Palestine Liberation Organization Executive Committee in 1969, and he became the chief PLO spokesman. For his death, see note 3.

2. The *Mu'allaqat* is an anthology of seven pre-Islamic Arabic poems, traditionally believed to have been hung from the Ka'ba in Mecca. The quotation is from 'Antara bin Shaddad's *qasida* to his cousin and sweetheart 'Abla.

3. During the night of 9–10 April 1973, Israeli commandos led by Ehud Barak (later Israeli prime minister), some disguised as women, assassinated Kamal Nasser, Kamal Adwan (b. 1935), and Muhammad Yusif al-Najjar (b. 1930), the latter two members of Fatah, at their homes in the Verdun district of Beirut.

4. Popularly known as "Palestinian Wedding," Darwish's seventeen-stanza elegy for the three men is actually titled "Blessed Be That Which Has Not Come!" The first stanza reads:

This is the wedding without an end,
In a boundless courtyard,
On an endless night.
This is the Palestinian wedding:
Never will lover reach lover,
Except as martyr or fugitive.

5. *Men in the Sun and Other Palestinian Stories*, trans. Hilary Kilpatrick (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999).

6. *All That's Left to You: A Novella and Short Stories*, trans. May Jayyusi and Jeremy Reed (Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2004).

7. The precursor to the PFLP, founded in Beirut in 1952 by George Habash.

8. *Palestine's Children: Returning to Haifa & Other Stories*, trans. Barbara Harlow and Karen Riley (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000).

9. Russian novelist (1869–1936) whose "social realism" became the official school of Soviet art.

10. Jordanian writer and journalist, 1951–2002.

11. Acclaimed Palestinian writer (1922–93), who received awards and prizes from the PLO and Israel alike.

12. Literary journal founded in Beirut in 1981 by Mahmoud Darwish, now published in Ramallah.

13. *The Secret Life of Saeed: the Pessoptimist*, trans. Trevor Le Gassick and Salma Khadra Jayyusi, (Northampton, MA: Interlink World Fiction, 2001).

14. 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam (1880–1935) was a Syrian-born shaykh who led early guerrilla resistance to the British Mandate and whose death in a shoot-out with British police was a precursor to the Arab Revolt of 1936–39; 'Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni (1908–48), commander of Palestinian forces in 1936–39 and again in 1947–48, was killed in the battle for Qastal, near Jerusalem, in April 1948; 'Ali Abu Tawq, military commander of the besieged Shatila refugee camp during the 1987–88 "war of the camps," was killed in battle in 1987; Kbalil al-Wazir, "Abu Jibad" (1935–88), a co-founder of Fatah and a leading PLO military leader, was assassinated in Tunis by Israeli commandos in April 1988.

15. Federico Garcia-Lorca (1899–1936) was a Spanish poet executed by Franco's forces at Granada during the Spanish Civil War.