

The Visibility of Palestinian Refugees: Women in Revolutionary Narratives A Gender Discourse

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In the following critique El-Hussari discusses three of Ghassan Kanafani's books: *Rijal fil-Shams (Men in the Sun)*, *Ma tabaqqā la-Kum (All That's Left to You)*, and *Umm Sa'ad*. Kanafani. As a Palestinian refugee himself, Kanafani has fathered a genre of literature known as 'Resistance Literature'. His literary works have continued to have a reverberating influence on the political and social discourse of Palestinian refugees throughout the Arab world. Though he does not focus specifically on gender issues, his analysis of Palestinian nationalism highlights the complex social and political context in which refugee women exist. El-Hussari's critique of Kanafani's novels focuses on the transformation of the female characters in their shift from passivity to political and social awareness and engagement. In so doing, El-Hussari suggests that Kanafani's female characters represent the Palestinian refugee population in their political and social struggle to regain a voice and an ownership of destiny. Though the Palestinian refugee situation is unique, Kanafani's focus on the Palestinian refugees struggle with engagement and activism resonates with other refugee communities in the Arab world. El-Hussari draws attention to the issue of refugee women who not only face discrimination as refugees but who also struggle with the gendered tension between voicelessness and engagement within the home and in the broader Arab society.

Introduction

In contemporary Palestinian fiction, gender differences, specifically focused on sexual politics and home economics, are submerged by national issues which loom over the life of Palestinian refugees, irrespective of gender. The majority of Ghassan Kanafani's literary works perpetuate this trend; excluding the female protagonist in *Umm Sa'ad*, women are rarely central to the plotline, or shaping the narrative's claim. Despite the marginality of these female characters, Kanafani does not sacrifice the tensions determining and defining the role of these characters. He also does not fall prey to classical feminist definitions of sexual politics. For example, Kate Millet (1971) notes the significance of power and domination in contemporary literary descriptions of sexual politics. These concepts do not seem to be the decisive factors shaping

women's destinies in Kanafani's revolutionary writing. Whether they are silent, absorbed in an internal monologue, or speak their minds candidly, Kanafani's female characters seem to be moved by intuition and natural gifts in their definition of existence. Choosing not to ignore the gender issue in favor of the national cause, Kanafani unravels several generations of women as he explores their narratives in a changing world, without dismissing the cultural thread that binds them together. Thus, the female characters' efforts to move towards self-awareness are framed by their response to the historical conditions traumatizing or elevating the lives of Palestinian refugees. In his three respective novels, namely *Rijal fil-Shams (Men in the Sun)*, *Ma tabaqqā la-Kum (All That's Left to You)*, and *Umm Sa'ad*, Kanafani portrays his female characters as dynamic, developing in the context of a specific time and space; there is a considerable shift in his

characters as they react to the compelling situations in which they find themselves. During this process of change, the female characters shift from a state of total passivity and nominal self-recognition to one of partial participation in their surrounding context, and eventually to a state of full awareness in which they begin to play an active role, not only in shaping their fate, but also the fate of their people.

Men in the Sun

In the first novel *Rijal fil-Shams (Men in the Sun)*, the voice of the woman is barely heard, as wife, mother or daughter: as a wife and mother, she is but a part of the memory of her husband who is facing his bleak fate, venturing into the unknown desert to secure a decent living for his family; as a daughter, she is the subject of an arranged marriage explored through the memories of her betrothed cousin who is smuggled across the desert borders to seek a job; and as divorced wife and mother, she is a part of a family story, related by her teen-age son to his traveling companions on the eve of their desert journey. Within the historical context conditioning the lives of the Palestinian refugees and in the absence of a national project to challenge their behavior, it seems that the woman is unable to directly engage in her context and to improve her status. Hence, it is the man who takes heed of that historical condition. As the three men, representing three Palestinian generations by virtue of their age-groups, accept to be smuggled inside a water-tank across the Iraqi-Kuwaiti desert borders, they accept the consequences of the illegal border crossing. Ironically, the three men noiselessly suffocate to death inside the symbolic moving coffin, leaving behind bereaved women silently struggling in a bigger tank, the refugee camp. The story highlights the national drama, in which both genders are engulfed. *Men in the Sun* is a tragedy without tragic heroes or heroines. The historical context is depicted as joining the genders in victimization, highlighted by both their silent suffering and voicelessness.

All That's Left to You

In *Ma Tabaqqa la-Kum (All That's Left to You)*, the woman assumes more significant visibility, both

physically and morally. She imposes herself on the texture of the narrative when her sexual disgrace triggers the subsequent events that structure the plotline. Her presence, as female, is constantly felt as part of a universal human condition that frames the mundane lives of refugee women, irrespective of time and space. Maryam, though not the principal character, is one of the clearest expressions of the Palestinian plight after 1948, during which most of the Palestinian people lost their land and became refugees. After sixteen years in exile, she is portrayed as a spinster approaching middle-age. She allows a married man and a collaborator with the Israelis (during the Israeli occupation of Gaza Strip in 1956) to tarnish and impregnate her. However, the disgrace Maryam has brought to the family honor, protected by her younger brother Hamid in the absence of her parents (the father was killed in action before the mass exodus and the mother was assumed to have been displaced somewhere in Jordan), is treated with sympathy. In this book, Maryam is more developed than the female characters in Kanafani's earlier book; she is not voiceless and inactive as they are. Her successive internal monologues coupled with her conversations with Hamid and Zakaria, her de facto husband, exhibit her potential to understand herself, both as a woman and as the mother she would become. This struggle with self-realization culminates in her heroic action of killing Zakaria with a kitchen knife in self-defense and, more significantly, in defense of motherhood. She refuses to abort her unborn child, as demanded by Zakaria, protecting motherhood at all costs. Symbolically, her act coincides with Hamid's readiness to slit the throat of his captive, an Israeli border-guard soldier, in the heart of the Naqab Desert which Hamid is crossing to reunite with his mother. These two acts of violence and protectionism symbolically usher in a new historical context which allows the dispossessed Palestinians, male and female alike, to re-enter history: their heroic acts invariably foreshadow the birth of the Palestine Liberation Movement a few years later.

The importance of a Palestinian national project and an active Palestinian identity, mobilizing both men and women, is central to both *Men in the Sun* and *All That's Left to You*. In *Men in the Sun*,

which ends with the death of the three Palestinian male refugees who are being smuggled inside the water-tank, the situation of the Palestinian refugees and their lack of a united voice is aptly expressed by the water-tank driver when he finds them dead: “Why didn’t you bang the sides of the tank? Why? Why? Why?” (Kanafani, 1956/1978, p. 56). In *All That’s Left to You*, however, the national project is in a state of ferment, requiring the participation and involvement of both genders for its actualization. This time, it is Maryam who takes action while Hamid, though determined to act, is frozen by indecision. Viewed aesthetically and symbolically, the silent death of Palestine in *Men in the Sun* is given a voice in *All That’s Left to You*, reverberating as Maryam towers over the dead body of her child’s father, the collaborator:

... hammering with cruel persistence into my head. Remorseless.
Pounding over him, and the bulk of his death heaped there. Pounding.
Pounding. Pounding.
(Kanafani, 1963/1990, p. 50)

Umm Sa’ad

In the third book, *Umm Sa’ad*, written in the wake of the successive defeat of three Arab armies in 1967, Kanafani takes advantage of the historical event to focus on specific issues that reflect the impact of the new dynamics in the Arab World, particularly on the life of Palestinian refugees. Although his book is based on a Palestinian narrative, depicted through the interaction between Umm Sa’ad and a reporter, Kanafani’s story is not a clear documentary. In fact, the factual and the fictional seamlessly blend, allowing the central figure, a traditional Palestinian mother, to gradually grow into her awareness of the Palestinian refugee context around her. Her contextual awareness is particularly textured by her son’s (Sa’ad) involvement with the *fidayin* (the guerilla fighters). Uncompromising, Umm Sa’ad is a memorable figure, in Palestinian fiction specifically and in contemporary Arabic fiction which portrays Palestinian people. Umm Sa’ad’s interviewer and interlocutor, possibly a reflection of Kanafani himself, says:

Umm Sa’ad is a real woman, quite familiar to me, and I still see her,
talk to her, and learn from her.
(Kanafani, n.d., p. 241)

Portrayed as class-conscious, originally a Palestinian peasant, Umm Sa’ad betrays an intuitive yet comprehensive knowledge about the miserable life of the refugee men and women “who have paid the bill of the Arab defeat in full” (Kanafani, n.d., p. 242). Irrespective of claims that Kanafani put his ideology in her mouth, her comments on the Six-Day War of 1967 are ordinary and often spoken by the common observer. Consider the following excerpt:

What war is that you’re talking about, my son? I heard about it on the radio. The radio announced the breakout of the war, and the radio announced it was over.
(Kanafani, n.d., p. 246)

This female character’s use of language reflects the simplicity of her life, defined by her identity as wife, mother, neighbor, and worker; she cannot be categorized otherwise. If her discourse and use of language is gendered when describing the period of national awakening, it is implied more than stated. Umm Sa’ad is a woman who employs all her five senses as she observes, participates in and comments on the context that surrounds her. Her wisdom, often highly commended by the interviewer, is no doubt the outcome of a long and bitter life experience. She seems devoid of ideological precepts, even during her visit to her son in a guerilla training base. However, she says to one of the passengers sitting next to her on the bus, “one tent is different from another” (pp. 246-265); that is, the tent offered as temporary shelter to the Palestinian refugees in the wake of the 1948 catastrophe is necessarily different from the tent in the training camp from which the Palestinians, militant now, re-enter history.

However, Kanafani portrays Umm Sa’ad as a carrier of both wisdom and prophecy:

This is a piece of a vine tree I’ve just cut off by the road nearby. I’ll plant it for you by the door step, and in a few years to come you’ll be able to eat grapes.

When I held it in my hand, it looked dry, brown and lifeless. You may know little about vine, for it is a bountiful tree that doesn't need much water. Much water wastes it. It takes its need of water from the moisture in the soil and atmosphere, then it yields, expecting nothing in return. (Kanafani, n.d., p. 249)

Between the opening of the story and its closing, Umm Sa'ad grows firmer as an altruistic woman with multiple roles. Memories of past heroes and collaborators are recalled to make a link with the demands of the present. Hope, nurtured only by a dream, seems to be replacing the miseries of life in the refugee camp, accumulated over twenty years of mass humiliation. In her character, the personal and the familial become part of the Palestinian national project, searching for liberation. She is happy to tell the reporter about the change her husband has undergone. More importantly, she speaks about the vine "stick" which she buried at the beginning of the book which, by the end, has blossomed. She hurries to tell the reporter about the "'stick' which has sprouted... has sprouted" (Kanafani, n.d., p. 336), and the reporter, led by her through the story, comes to look at the tiny tip of the 'stick', alive and green, cutting through the soil in which it has been planted, this time "with pride that makes a bang" (Kanafani, n.d., p. 336).

Conclusion

All of the female actors portrayed in Kanafani's work are Palestinian refugees who were forced, along with thousands others, to leave their homeland in 1948 for other neighboring Arab countries in which they simply 'survived' and

'dreamed', refusing to invest in the present until the question of Palestine is resolved. Homeless and stateless, UN ration-card survivors, and refugee camp "dwellers", the women featured in Kanafani's stories are depicted as the potential carriers of a burden bigger than they could have imagined: personal, familial, and national. In the first two novels, *Men in the Sun* and *All That's Left to You*, the gender discourse hiding in the shadow of the national cause marks a shift from the female's voicelessness in the first novel to her embodiment of the heroic, in whom the familial and the national coincide. In the third novel, *Umm Sa'ad*, the woman becomes a symbol of heroism and inspiration, joining the underground revolution through her first-born son. Kanafani portrays her as a simple but strong woman in whose class-conscious character the personal, the familial, and the national are inextricably bound. She epitomizes, both in word and deed, the most significant transition in the lives of the Palestinian refugees. Similarly, her narrative, defined by home and motherhood, gains meaning against the backdrop of the national cause. The two discourses are thus symbolically linked, naturally informing each other. The voiceless woman in the first novel is equivalent to the failure of the three men to bang the sides of the water tank. The pounding of death over the dead body of the collaborator and the oppressor of motherhood is furthered by Hamid's readiness to act against the occupation. The vivid growth and budding of the vine is a reflection of the rise of the Palestinian Revolution.

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