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## *MEN IN THE SUN: EXISTENTIALIM TO EXTINCTION*

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### **Abstract**

Ghassan Kanafani's men in the sun embark on existential journeys surrounded with danger. Towards the end of their journey, they died silently of suffocation inside an empty water tank on the smuggler's lorry on the border of the land of their dreams. The immigrants' bodies were thrown in the darkness of the night on the garbage dumps of the illustrious Kuwait City. The garbage dumps where the smuggler left the three corpses symbolize the cosmic evil, the capriciousness of the world and the absurdity of existence. In death, the three men become memorable because of their actions, continual struggle, and more because of their final moments of inaction that mocks the capriciousness of fate. The narrative acquires a universal quality because the author did not analyze the causes and the details of immigration of a particular person or persons, rather he focuses on the characters as products of events partly beyond their reach, and more as products of their own anxiety and free choices. Kanafani's main characters are like Sisyphus, struggling against all odds to assert their existence.

**Keywords:** Kanafani, Immigration, Existentialism, Palestine, Journey.

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## INTRODUCTION

Kanafani's narratives are basically inspired by his personal experiences. *Men in the Sun* was written after the return journey Ghassan Kanafani took from Kuwait to Lebanon in an old car through the arid lands of Kuwait, Iraq and Syria. The novella is mainly about the hardships and eventual death of three impoverished Palestinian refugees journeying across the desert to Kuwait. Critics such as Kilpatrick, Ihsan Abass, Nidal al-Salih, among many others, saw the narrative as an allegory on the Palestinian loss and *Nakba*. *Nakba* is the Arabic word for the catastrophe that befell the Palestinians upon the establishment of the Israeli State in Palestine in 1948. These critics, taking their cue from the struggle, alienation, exploitation and the eventual demise of the main personae of the narrative, argue that in their search for food and living, Palestinians lost their focus and forgot their basic aim: that is the land they were evicted from.

In my view, Kanafani did not analyze the causes and the details of immigration of a particular person or persons, rather he focuses on the characters as products of events partly beyond their reach, and more as products of their own anxiety and free choices. Instead of talking, for instance, about Israeli occupation and transgression directly, Kanafani wrote about the struggle of displaced men in an attempt to salvage their lives in spite of the absurdities and grim realities by which they are surrounded. I believe that Kanafani's main characters are like Sisyphus, struggling against all odds to assert their existence. A shallow reading of the narrative may lead readers to conclude that the eventual death by suffocation of the main personae of the narrative puts an end to the émigrés' and the other characters' existential project; and might make readers wrongly conclude that Kanafani is creating pseudo existentialist characters only reminiscent of Sisyphus, but not like him. To prove the contrary, the paper explores the characters' significance as symbols of struggle; and reviews the significance of the last moment in the lives of the main characters from an existentialist perspective.

## THE CHARACTERS AS SYMBOLS OF STRUGGLE

Regardless of the narrative technicalities involved in the presentation of events, Kanafani skillfully infused his narrative with many symbols, such as the characters themselves, the desert, the journey, the sun, the empty water tank among many others. In this brief section, I will only briefly introduce the main characters in the narrative.

To begin with, Abu Qais, who lost his house and olive trees to the occupation, is an old man living in refugee camps. He hesitantly desires to go to Kuwait. Eventually, under the pressure of poverty, he has to take action: he decides to take the dangerous journey across the desert on the hope of making some money. His action stems from his desire to build a new house and buy new trees to replace what he lost upon his eviction from his homeland. Though critics saw in Abu Qais a dreamy romantic land lover, he has more in him than first meets the eye. He is an old stubborn fighter. He is somehow not different from stubborn aging figures in literature such as Santiago in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. The way Santiago, in spite of his advanced age,



faces the potential threat of death in the wild ocean, Abo Qais, in his endeavor to reach his target, defies the desert; he enters a burning, tomb-like tank to evade detection; and he waits there patiently till the end. Abu Qais becomes a symbol for extreme struggle in spite of old age in a hostile world.

Asa'd, another refugee in exile, is a young man wanted by the authorities in a neighboring Arab country for his political activism. He undertakes the hazardous journey to Kuwait with the help of a driver, who is an acquaintance of his father. Ironically enough, the father's acquaintance, who is supposed to transport Asa'd across the borders from Jordan to Iraq, abandons him in the burning desert, few miles before the Jordan-Iraq borders after robbing him. In spite of the blow Asa'd receives at the beginning of his journey, he does not give up the struggle. He defies the adverse situation he finds himself in; and eventually he reaches Basra still hoping to find a smuggler to get him across the borders into Kuwait. His main purpose is to work and make money to pay off his debt and prepare the ground for a pendant marriage to a relative he hardly loves. As a symbol, Asa'd stands for the potent individual struggling for a purpose in a very hostile universe.

Marwan, the third youth in the narrative, is a young boy who has not finished his school yet. He finds himself responsible for the sustenance of his mother and little siblings after their father and elder brother abandon them. This leaves Marwan on his own to fend for himself at such an early age. Marwan symbolizes the victimized youth struggling against all odds in search of a safe haven. In metaphorical terms, Marwan may not be that different from the impoverished youth that appear in Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. In spite of all adversities, Marwan, like the other two characters, maintains his existential struggle and aims for reaching Kuwait, without expecting charity from anybody, the way Dickens' characters did.

Last, but not least, among Kanafani's most controversial characters, is Abul-Khizaran. Like the other two characters, he is a young Palestinian. He works as a lorry driver. He previously fought the invaders of his homeland and lost his penis in a bomb explosion. He immigrates to Kuwait. In spite of his apparent flippancy, he is bitter about the world he finds himself in. Yet, he is not without a sense of purpose. His main purpose in life is to make as much money as possible to guarantee a comfortable retirement. To achieve this, he resorts to trafficking illegal immigrants across the Kuwait-Iraq borders. So in a way, he is the catalyst of the narrative as all the characters are brought to light through him.

As Abul-Khizaran operates without a penis, to gratify his own ego, he revels in telling promiscuous stories about his sexual prowess. For many of Kanafani's critics, this emasculated person in *Men in the Sun* becomes the symbol of Palestinian allies, the symbol of Arab regimes, and the symbol of Palestinian leadership. The truth is that though Abul-Khizaran may stand for the fairly or relatively good that yields evil once in a while due to the capriciousness of fate, he is a symbol of the existential survivalist, the materialist, and the pragmatic. Indeed, Abul-Khizaran, more than any of the other characters, went through the so called existential anxiety phase after losing his penis and homeland and emerged as a different man with a purpose that kept him alive and going. Significantly, Kanafani distinguished Abul-Khizaran from the other characters by ironically endowing him with a lost sexual organ. While the other characters in the



narrative lost their homeland and with it other means of their living, Abul-Khizaran, lost his homeland and with it a significant part of his body. Had Abul-Khizaran been intended to be an ordinary character, he would have either killed himself or metamorphosed into a queer. Since he did not do either, he became a symbol for the existential hope.

### THE JOURNEY AND THE EXISTENTIAL STRUGGLE

All the characters populating Kanafani's narrative lost their homeland and with it, they forfeited parts of their identities. As a result, they are always on the move in search of something to compensate for their initial loss. They embark on existential journeys surrounded with danger. Symbolically speaking, the journeys taken by all these characters become a substitute for their loss and an assertion of their desire to achieve and gain something. It is as if through the undertaking of such hazardous journeys that those burdened characters can always remind themselves that they exist. Indeed, in their context, one can easily replace Descartes aphorism "*Je pense donc je suis* /I think therefore I am" (Carter & Muir, 1967, 129) with *Je voyage donc je suis*/I travel therefore I am.

It is argued that journeys help develop and change one's perception of one's self. Journeys, sometimes, create an exaggerated sense of identity. Only when the journeyers settle in a territory beyond the one they left; their identity begins to take further dimensions. The acquired identity dimensions vary depending on various factors, among them one's gender, education, orientation, political views, color and perception of the world at large. Kanafani, in *Men in the Sun*, presented characters already produced by various journeys in their lives. Abu Qais and the others already had a journey enforced upon them by the occupying agency that threw them out of their territory and away to another terrain. Some might argue that the characters' initial immigration to territories populated by the same race and ethnicity minimizes the level of anxiety and alienation felt by immigrants to alien territories. But the truth is that any mass movement by force constitutes a traumatic transgression that mediates one's identity and perception of others. This is why the novel begins with Abu-Qais pressing his chest and heart to the ground as a symbol for a yearning to and a strong desire for the land he left behind. The characters' initial departure or their earlier journeys did temporarily cripple them and render them impotent: Abu-Qais was unable to do anything for ten years, Abul-Khizaran had the symbol of his manhood chopped off, while the other two characters remained penniless and dependent on relatives and acquaintances.

It takes the characters in the novel quite some time to adjust and to raise the spirit of existence in themselves before attempting to move in another direction. Abu Qais waited for ten years hoping to return to his homeland while doing nothing. Eventually he decides to take action by leaving his second place of enforced residence.

Kanafani's travelers are entirely different from the travelers one reads about in the Western romances or the Eastern Sinbad and Arabian tales. His travelers are not invincible heroes. They are, to use Fanon's term "the wretched of the earth" attempting sordidly real deeds such as walking through the desert under the burning August sun,



dodging surveillance and desert patrols, hiding in a furnace-like container to avoid detection, and standing abuse and insult. When a smuggler slapped Marwan on the face in Basra, the latter swallowed his pride and refrained from protesting or hitting back, though he was faultless. Kanafani might have intended the slap as a symbol, like lots of events and objects. To some Kanafani scholars, the Basra smuggler, with his dictates, authority, shabby looks, represents hierarchies and institutions beyond Marwan's reach. Though the smuggler is potentially Kanafani's signifier for the oppressive agency of occupation, corruption, Arab regimes and Arab institutions; Marwan's decision to act submissively in that situation is a sign of his maturity, pragmatism and instinctive awareness of the absurdity of the world. At that moment in the narrative, Marwan has to make an instant existential choice between returning the slap and the insult and then forfeiting the journey across the border to Kuwait, or bravely take the insult and continue with his journey. The key point here is that, regardless of the action Marwan takes, Kanafani endows his characters with the power of choice. This qualifies the characters to become existentialists while alive; and tragic when they fall or fail, as eventually what happens to them stems from their own actions, flaws, anxieties and free choices.

Asa'd is another character who embodies existentialism to the marrow. His fear and anxiety for his freedom, because of his political activism, push him to seek a place in a remote territory to ward off the anger of the authorities. Though Kanafani had Asa'd cheated by an acquaintance of his father, who left him in the middle of the desert on the borderline between Jordan and Iraq to die or to be captured, the boy managed to smuggle himself across the borders in the darkness of the night on foot. Asa'd's initial success in crossing the borders and eventually reaching Basra - about 1200 kilometers across the desert from where he was abandoned- is a metaphor for the existential struggle in the real and philosophical sense. After all, Asa'd succeeds in taking the Sisyphus rock somewhere near the top of the hill.

## **EXISTENCE AND EXTINCTION**

No doubt that the men in the sun represent the Palestinians of the 1950s and 1960s. Many of Kanafani's critics concur that those Palestinian men on the road failed and eventually died because of their encounter with other corrupt, Arab and Palestinian, opportunists and criminals. Kanafani had the three of his émigrés reach very short of their destination and fall, few kilometers away from the dreamland, in the hands of the unscrupulous and impotent man who took them to their eventual destiny as corpses and left them on the garbage dumps there after depriving them of their meager belongings. Regardless of the critics' assessment of Abul-Khizaran's role in the death of his shipment, I am of the opinion that the three men in the tank, made their own choice and kept to it. Abul-Khizaran's initial refusal to understand why the three men did "not knock on the walls of the tank" (Kanafani, 1999, 74), masks only his initial anxiety and fear of being held responsible for what happens to his shipment. In Appiah's words, for instance, John Stuart Mill advocates that whatever path an individual take must stem from the individual's own choice regardless of its correctness. Appiah adds that Mill believes "freedom mattered not just because it enables other things-such as discovering the truth- but also because without it people





could not develop the individuality that is essential element of human good.” (Appiah, 2005, 5) In *Men in the Sun*, the final decisions of getting into a furnace-like tank, and the act of waiting inside the tank without attempting to alert the border guards are made by the men themselves; regardless of what is said otherwise. The question of whether their decisions are right or wrong is subject to debate, and may yield plenty of answers; but the fact remains that these men made their choice and are fully responsible for its outcome. Any illegal immigrant knows very well that risk is part and parcel of the act of being smuggled. The old, the young and the very young characters alike bravely made up their minds, took their decisions, right or wrong, and persisted in their actions. Though, like Abul-Khizaran, many critics and readers still do not understand why those people “did not knock on the walls of the tank” for help, (Kanafani, 1999, 74) the existential answer is that they opted to perform the act of inaction and wait for the arrival of Abul-Khizaran, the way Beckett’s tramps did in *Waiting for Godot*. Oxymoronic as it sounds, inaction becomes an action that goes well with the notion of the cosmic absurd. The act of inaction in the tank is not without an existential purpose. Waiting is the commodity of hope for reaching the target. Any action taken otherwise by the three characters, would mean giving up hope, giving up the struggle, or embracing themselves for another journey in the opposite direction after paying the penalty for attempting the illegal border crossing. These characters apparently may not have been expecting to die soon, but when they did, they died for a purpose and a goal they could not reach due to the absurdity of life. The border guards’ absurd chitchat with Abul-Khizaran while the three men were being grilled in the tank is tantamount to the cosmic disorder that, most of the time, defeats intention, plans and purposes.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the garbage dumps where Abul-Khizaran left the three corpses symbolize the cosmic evil, the capriciousness of life and the absurdity of existence. The three men, in fact, become memorable because of their actions, continual struggle, and more because of their final moments of inaction that mocks the capriciousness of fate. Many critics such as Nidal al-Salih and Ihsan Abbas, among others see the essentiality of remaining attached and committed to the land as the main theme and motif of the novel. Those critics conclude that any departure from this essentiality will lead to defeat and self-erasure. Such assumption, that the characters’ final defeat by death resulting from abandoning home and land, may not be that sound. Such assumption ignores the fact that Abul-Khizaran, a very significant character in the narrative, lost the symbol of his manhood fighting for the land on the land and remained alive and prospering at the end of the narrative. As a matter of fact, significantly enough, Abul-Khizaran regained the lost part of his manhood through his flippant narratives of promiscuity outside his native land. So I do not see the departure of the characters as the reason behind their death. Rather, by their death, the characters crowned their existential struggle, mocked the absurdity of the world and the capriciousness of fate. Ironically speaking, if it were not for their death, those men would have lost their significance and the narrative would have lost its value. Thus, this is to say that the struggle and death of those characters gave them eternal lives; and the garbage dumps



they were left on, are nothing but the world itself with all its absurdities and incongruities.

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