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Representing a Traumatized Nation in Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*

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Abstract

This article investigates post-colonial trauma in Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* (1962), a novella portraying the harsh life and psychological pain of the Palestinians after losing their homeland. The article explores examples of traumatized characters and Kanafani's techniques of conveying this trauma to the reader. Characters seem to be engulfed in a bleak atmosphere of trauma pervading every aspect of their lives. Symptoms of trauma including hopelessness, confusion, helplessness, anxiety, inability to forget the past, and loneliness show in characters' behavior, thoughts, and feelings. Struggling with their unbearable despair, they become victims of a smuggler who is also traumatized and rendered impotent by war. The journey made to find a decent life only brings misery, humiliation, and death. Kanafani's concern about the general public appears in a plot revolving around the needs and frustrations of people coming from a humble social background. Kanafani pinpoints the grave consequences of colonialism which put Palestinian people under nerve-racking conditions. His account may be seen as an attempt to draw attention to the suffering of his fellow citizens, and consequently gain support for their cause. Alternatively, Kanafani may be living in the same trauma his characters suffer from, and thus revisiting it in his fictional retelling of the story of his nation.

Key words: Post-colonial trauma; *Men in the Sun*; Ghassan Kanafani; Arabic literature

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INTRODUCTION

Ghassan Kanafani is known for his depictions of the Palestinians' tragedy of losing their homeland, a traumatic experience that touched his heart and changed the lives of almost all Palestinians. After leading a decent life in Palestine, his father being "a prominent lawyer" and starting "his studies at Les Frères, a French missionary school in Jaffa" (Qualey, 2015), he moved to live in the refugee camps in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948. As a writer, he had a big chance to meet a lot of Palestinian refugees who had great suffering. In *Men in the Sun* [shortened into *Men* throughout the rest of this article] (1962; trans. 1991), Kanafani deals with the Palestinian post-colonial trauma in the hope of giving voice to those silenced by power inequity, encouraging them to resist colonial policies. He tries to warn such silenced and underprivileged people of giving in to the tensions and pressure resulting from their poor living conditions. While in simple terms trauma means psychological pain or injury caused by an accident or a violent incident, the effects of this traumatic event are long-lasting and take the form of stress, anxiety, neurotic behavior, depression,...etc. Kanafani's text manifests such trauma symptoms and reactions. Moreover, it might even indicate the writer's implication in the same trauma of his nation he is writing about. Kanafani dwells on the Palestinian plight in his fictions. *Men* is probably his most memorable revisiting of this theme of national trauma.

1. EXPRESSING HISTORICAL TRAUMA

In modern history, Palestine has gone through severe experiences of “massacres, land confiscation, dispossession, deportation and assassination” (Hamdi, 2011, p.22). Harrowing stories of bloodshed speak of a tragedy of massive losses and horror that have traumatized Palestinian people. Dealing with traumatic experiences requires an investigation and understanding of their surrounding circumstances. According to Herman, “we need to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future” (1992, p.1). Historians as well as specialists in other fields including politics and cultural studies have studied conflicts in the Middle East including Palestine. As for the Palestinian tragedy, it can be traced back to the 1897 Zionist conference in Switzerland followed by Sykes–Picot Agreement in which Britain was awarded the mandate for Palestine and some Arab countries in 1916. These events were followed by Balfour Declaration in 1917 which is the most tragic event in Palestine’s history. Balfour Declaration gave Israel the right to occupy cities in Palestine in 1948 (Maharmeh, Ata, & Hakeem, 2004, pp.24-25). This event, known as Al Nakba (disaster), “involved the destruction of over 500 Palestinian towns and villages and the exodus of three-quarters of a million Palestinians through direct intimidation or fear” (Rolston, 2014, p.42). In 1967, Israel occupied all of Palestine’s land in Al Naksa (setback). In the introduction to the translation of *All that’s Left to You*, Allen considers these events as “A period of intense and agonizing soul-searching” (1990, p.xiv). Policies of displacement and dispossession have left Palestinian people in a state of shock and loss. The exodus from Palestine shapes the traumatic past of its nation. Tragic historical events can leave deep effects on people and make them traumatized. Kanafani’s fictional portrayal of the Palestinian tragedy reflects an awareness of such deep effects of the traumatic past on its victims.

Kanafani highlights “what has been missing—or ignored—throughout the quotidian of human reality; underlying the vital history that continues to connect Palestinians everywhere to the land once called Palestine” (Abdelrazek et al., 2008). Kanafani’s fiction fills out a gap in accounts establishing connections not only among Palestinians themselves, but also between Palestinians and their homeland as well as their history and culture, providing human as well as historical dimensions of their experience. His fiction plays an important role in constructing the individual and collective identity of his people inside Palestine and outside it. Kanafani seems to be aware that the oppressed are further marginalised by being uprooted and silenced. Portraying the experience of dehumanization experienced by a wide spectrum of the Palestinian society inside their country and inside the refugee camps can be seen as a way to resist this marginalization. By retelling the catastrophic events the

Palestinians face during and after the exodus, he urges them to break their silence, to take action, and to resist their colonizers.

Kanafani’s writings suggest a symbiotic relationship between literature and history. Fiction can convey emotional overtones and meanings that may not be easily expressed by historians. *Men* is one of Kanafani’s novellas that “explore the need to recover the past—the lost homeland—by action” (Abdelrazek et al., 2008). In fact, connections between Kanafani and resistance are clearly established by researchers like Rawashdeh who describes Kanafani’s novellas as “armed resistance literature” (2001, p.1), and Eid who, in his analysis of *Men*, maintains that “The question of resistance is the real focus of the text: resistance as a pre-condition for the existence of the human being” (2013, p.7). In other words, Kanafani wants the exiled to restore connections with their homeland rather than engage in journeys leading them nowhere.

Kanafani attests to a traumatic history that his people have faced. He bears witness to the suffering caused by an unspeakable past of colonial oppressions. Retelling the traumatic past helps the traumatized recover and reconnect with their inner selves, other people, and the whole world. Hamdi explains the significance of a literary sub-genre called “bearing witness” which “addresses the need for a kind of literature that communicates to the present about a past that is unthinkable and which, in the case of the Palestinian narrative has been intentionally suppressed by the dominant narrative” (2011, p.23). Palestinian literature is suppressed and marginalized by the occupation forces which mute any voice calling for resistance, and this repression culminated in the assassination of some Palestinian writers including Kanafani himself. Bearing witness helps us to read and listen to “both the language of trauma and the silence of its mute repletion of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand” (Caruth, 1996, p.9). The literature reflects the suffering of the colonized like a tremulous echo which reminds them of what they have lost under occupation and the need to take action to deal with the bad conditions they live in. Taking part in conveying the traumatic history of a nation shows that a writer’s identity is inseparable from his milieu.

2. DEFINITIONS

Trauma is a variegated psychosomatic phenomenon with elements that “are still debatable globally” (War, 2016, p.1). Different definitions reflect its complexity and “multi-dimensional nature” (Ibid.). *Oxford English Dictionary* defines trauma as “a deeply distressing or disturbing experience, emotional shock following a stressful event or physical injury, which may lead to long-term neurosis and physical injury.” In this sense, the word may refer to physical harm done to one’s body or denote behavioral and psychological disorders.

Drawing on Freud, Caruth (1996, p.3) defines trauma as “wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind”, highlighting the trauma resulting from psychological injuries not physical ones and calling them “the wound of the mind”. These wounds are located in the mind of the individual who suffers from trauma and passes through a period of “latency” which seems for Caruth (1996, p.7) as “the period during which the effects of experience are not apparent”; then it returns to haunt the survivor. It is not just the event which causes the traumatic shock; any unexpected occurrence of an accident causes it as well. Not only are the people who lost some of their family members and relatives or their body parts affected by trauma, but also those who witnessed these traumatic events can be affected too. Trauma, thus, refers to events or experiences disturbing the natural course of events in people’s daily lives.

3. SPEAKING OF A TRAUMA REVERBERATING ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

Men shows the trauma of an “existential exile” (Shaker, 2015). It covers a large proportion of the Palestinian general public represented by three major characters of different ages. These characters which come from humble social backgrounds include a school- boy a young man and an old man. All of them struggle to make ends meet. Kanafani’s characters live in miserable conditions indicating that post-colonial trauma affects all Palestinian people and no one seems to escape its grip.

Trauma symptoms differ from one person to another. And individuals’ susceptibility to trauma is variable. The event which traumatizes one person may not traumatize another, or it can be less traumatic to others. Trauma is usually associated with negative feelings like anger, shame, guilt, negative self-image, negative thoughts about the world, self-blame, depression, anxiety, and hostility (Germain et al., 2016, pp.73-74). Struggling with such feelings renders the lives of trauma victims hard or even unbearable. Different characters in *Men* suffer from trauma.

3.1 Secondary Trauma Victims: The Schoolboy

Trauma victims may include subsequent generations. According to Visser, trauma symptoms may appear not only on those who suffer directly “primary victims” from traumatic events but may also include “secondary victims, witnesses and bystanders at the event, relatives and friends victims” (2011, p.272). These people will suffer from the same symptoms the directly traumatized people suffer from such as “nightmares, flashbacks and depression” and they suffer from “an increased sensitivity to cynicism, depersonalization and distinct changes in spirituality or worldview (Visser, 2011, p.272). Marwan, a boy born in a

refugee camp, is not a primary victim. He does not suffer directly from the exodus, but the traumatic atmosphere that his family got exposed to affect him badly. He takes on responsibility for providing for his family after his father’s marriage and his brother’s abandonment of the family. He finds himself alone face to face with life, leaving his dream of being a doctor and going to a smuggler to get him into Kuwait to find a job to support his family. At the same time, he suffers from loneliness; “he had found himself alone and a stranger” (*Men*, 1991, p.23). During their journey to Kuwait, when Marwan and the other men get out of the tank for the first time, their traumatic memories haunt them. Marwan gets “swallowed up in his own thoughts” (*Ibid.*, p.46), thoughts carrying misery and despair.

This new generation grows up with feelings of humiliation, trying to overcome the difficulties and insults that they face to become acclimatized to the bad conditions of life. When the smuggler hits Marwan on the face, he stands with no reaction, losing his dream of a better life; “the heavy hand crashed down on to his cheek, and the word was lost in fearful roar” he realized that “any attempt to restore his honour was futile” (*Ibid.*, p.23). He felt that he had “committed an unforgivable sin” (*Ibid.*), and his dream of a better life for his family and himself was broken and turned to a humiliating experience which he digested in silence. This present misery awakens his past misery through flashbacks.

The exodus and the dehumanization of the Palestinian experience maybe behind their suffering from internalized oppression, which manifests itself in negative emotions like “self- hatred, self-concealment, fear of violence and feelings of inferiority, resignation, isolation, powerlessness and gratefulness for being allowed to survive” (Qtd in Williams, 2012, p.32). Living in camps after losing their houses and land creates a sense of despair and depression among Palestinians. They suffer from self-abuse. Related to this point, Fanon claims that “there are latent forms of psychosis which become overt as the result of a traumatic experience” (1967, p.62). Everyone has a certain capacity to endure traumatic events and this capacity differs from one person to another. When the traumatized become unable to bear their traumatic experience they become unable to think properly and start to abuse and blame themselves, thinking that everything in life is against them.

3.2 Traumatized Youth

Assad is a young single man who borrows money from his uncle to get smuggled to Kuwait. His uncle gave him the money as a kind of a bride price for his daughter, which is considered insulting since he does not have money as a result of colonization. The colonizers victimized the colonized by making them poor and starving. Most of them do not have money to get a better life. Assad, a young man who does not have the dowry considers

taking the money from the bride's father an insult which imprisons him under his uncle's mercy all of his life. Assad considers this way of marrying as insult; "he felt the unuttered insult wound his throat" (*Men*, 1991, p.19). So, he wants to run away. Assad suffers from the experience of smuggling when he moved from Jordan to Basra. The smuggler lied to him which makes him recall all of his past experience of suffering; exodus, living in refugee camps in depressing conditions, his uncle's grip and the smuggler's opportunism make him feel "alone in the whole world" (*Ibid.*, p.18). He wants to flee from everything in his life, so he continues his journey to Kuwait after all the terrible suffering that he has had.

The colonizers keep insulting the colonized people and consider them as animals. When Assad is arrested in the demonstration, the policeman considered the men who were carrying Assad "donkeys" and "spat in his face, but Assad did not move as the saliva ran slowly down his forehead and gathered on the tip of his nose in a nasty viscous mess" (*Ibid.*, p.47). This accident left a deep scar on Assad's psyche, and the gathering of saliva on his nose, which is usually considered the centre of pride and arrogance in Arabic culture, becomes a sign of degradation and humiliation. Visser (2011, p.272) explains that "behaviour and memory have quite opposite pattern from emotional numbness to extreme alertness or even explosive excitability". Assad cannot pass by the accident, and it is still fresh in his mind and weakening him.

3.3 Elderly Trauma Victims

The third traveller is Abu Qais, who is an old man. He left his trees, home and land behind him. His dream is to have a small room to die peacefully in and to help him pass his years as his old age does not show mercy or sympathy. His wife forced him to go to Kuwait to feed his little children's hungry mouths. Abu Qais envies Ustaz Selim who died a day before the occupation of his village. Ustaz Selim did not find anyone to bury him, but Abu Qais assumes that Ustaz Selim saved himself "humiliation and wretchedness" and "preserved [his] old age from shame" (*Ibid.*, p.11). This shows that Abu Qais is a traumatized man, preferring death over life.

Kanafani's awareness of the negative effects of trauma can be further discerned in the character of Abul Khaizuran. Unlike the other major characters whose main aim is to lead a decent life without causing harm to others, Abul Khaizuran is an impotent man who becomes a smuggler engaging in risky tasks endangering the lives of others for the sake of money. Instead of feeling proud for taking part in defending his village against invaders, his meditations express his disappointment and suspicions about the importance of patriotism and morality. He even seems to have lost his religious faith. As a man injured and rendered impotent while fighting for the sake of his country, Abul Khaizuran deserves to be honoured and rewarded for his sacrifice. However, such privileges

and rights are not given to fighters of colonized nations. He rather becomes a refugee in a neighboring country working as a driver involved in suspicious activities across the borders between Iraq and Kuwait. His mood swings and indifference to the possible danger he is likely to bring upon himself as well as other fellows reflect the behaviour of a man traumatized by both his physical impairment as well as his surrounding conditions. After disposing of the dead bodies of his travel companions, Abul Khaizuran appears as a helpless man with a disturbed mind. His shock can be felt as, "a series of disconnected scenes was passing ceaselessly through his brain, incoherent and inexplicable. He could sense exhaustion creeping through his limbs like straight columns of ants" (*Ibid.*, p.72). His loss of integrity, clearheadedness, and feeling seems evident.

Leading a life with neither protection nor consolation, Abul Khaizuran shows no signs of regretting his role in the tragic death of his fellow travellers. He rather tends to absolve himself by the idea that it was their responsibility to scream or make noise to ask for help. Taking the money and other belongings of his dead victims further asserts man's opportunism and hardheartedness. He is a victim who does not mind taking part in victimizing others. Put differently, the dangerous effects of trauma are not limited to primary victims. Negative feelings of loss and worthlessness experienced by individual victims may affect the society as a whole.

4. KANAFANI'S TECHNIQUES OF CONVEYING TRAUMA

Kanafani skilfully articulates traumatic behaviour. Characters' meditations, conversations and interaction with other characters give clues about their inner feelings. Their silences and helplessness betray their traumatized psyches. This section highlights the utilization of two techniques conveying trauma: flashbacks and imagery.

4.1 Flashbacks

The trauma of different characters in *Men* can be noticed in memories and flashbacks. Such flashbacks make the painful memories alive in the traumatized person's psyche and they show that the traumatized person still suffers from the traumatic experience. According to Freud, the traumatized person's reaction "may take various forms. For quite slight increases in excitation, alteration in his own body may perhaps be enough: weeping, abusing, raging and so on. The more intense the trauma, the greater is the adequate reaction" (1893/2010, p.296). Characters go back with their memories to moments when they wish the events had never happened or that they had not survived. These memories give clues to their trauma. According to Caruth (1996, p.59), "painful repetition of the flashbacks can only be understood as the absolute

inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasable event that has not been given psychic meaning in any way". The Palestinians suffer from identity erasure and complete loss of land enveloping their life with darkness. Everything around them is in black. Their will to life is killed; they care for nothing. The suffering and the emotional scars left by colonization speak of their trauma.

Trauma is "painful remembering as deferred action that constitutes trauma" (Visser, 2011, p.273). Abul Khaizuran suffers from belated melancholic experience which appears clearly in his memories. Everything is repeated in his mind as if it were happening now, and he feels the pain that he has suffered from during the past accident; "he felt a terrible pain coiled between his thighs" (*Men*, 1991, p.37); this pain brings back the "black thought [that] occurred to him and he began to scream like a madman" (Ibid.). Abul Khaizuran considers his painful experience as a humiliation that he lived "day after day and hour after hour [and] he had swallowed it with his pride... and still he hadn't yet got used to it, he hadn't accepted it" (Ibid., p.38). In the past, he thought that he could get rid of his humiliation and be normal again by running away from the hospital, but he never recovered from the pain he had experienced for ten years. Sarcastically, when Abu Baqir asks him "Is it your virility? Or aren't there many men about? Abul Khaizuran laughed hysterically" (Ibid., p.51). Laughing hysterically is a symptom of what Freud calls "traumatic hysteria" as he finds a relation between hysteria and psychical trauma (1893-1895/2010, p.8). Freud considered "cry or laugh or blush" (1893-1895/2010, p.197) as symptoms of hysteria and the fright may turn into laughter after rescue (1893-1895/2010, p.202). Abul Khaizuran's laughter shows his emotional imbalance caused by his trauma.

The traumatic memories keep the person a prisoner of his past; this person is like a living body without emotion. The person with traumatic memories tries to release his/her mind from the traumatic thought of finding himself or herself trapped in constant pain. Abul Khaizuran recalls the painful memories when he sees the sun or any spot of light which reminds him of the image of the operating hospital room, and the pain that he felt becomes very clear. When Assad asks him if he has been ever married, his face immediately gets "veiled in sadness as though he hadn't been laughing a moment before" (*Men*, 1991, p. 37). Herman (1992, p.28) explains that "traumatized people relive the moment of trauma not only in their thoughts and dreams but also in their actions. The question makes him very weak and he replies with another question "Why do you ask?" (*Men*, 1991, p.37). Abul Khaizuran's (1992, p.27) reaction proves Herman's claims of the "traumatic memories lack of verbal narrative and context", as he is unable to say or explain anything about his unspeakable memories. Ironically, Abul Khaizuran is given masculine name and appearances "his neck and hands a suggestion of strength

and firmness" (*Men*, 1991, p. 24) and the officers think that he has an affair with the dancer Kawkab and he spends his time with her. When Abul Khaizuran drove the tank "suddenly the metal disc disappeared behind drops of salt water, which filled his eyes... were those salty drops tears, or sweat running from his burning forehead?" (*Men*, 1991, p.54). He is not aware whether these drops are tears for everything that he lost (i.e. tears caused by emotional pain) or just sweat. According to Caruth (1996, p.7), "the story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling an escape from reality- the escape from death, or from its referential force- rather attests to its endless impact on a life", and it is considered, as Caruth (1996, p.7) claims, "a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of its survival". Survivors of traumatic experiences suffer double every time they remember their trauma. The traumatic event not only returns to haunt the traumatized person but also its impact is not fully known during the event. During the traumatic event, victims want to escape and survive as there is no time to think about or have a special feeling about it. But when the memories return, the image of the accident becomes very clear and the tiny details that victims were unable to recognize during the accident rush into their minds; the scene of the traumatic event becomes clearer, which makes them suffer double.

4.2 Imagery

Kanafani employs imagery to convey traumatic associations. For example, the black bird which flies aimlessly reflects the helpless life of the Palestinian refugees; "and there was one black bird circling high up, alone and aimless" (*Men*, 1991, p.9). At the same time, the black bird represents Abu Qais who is moving aimlessly like other Palestinian refugees. This bird reminds Abu Qais of his suffering from alienation, and he feels that he is insignificant; "he was suddenly filled with a bitter feeling of being strange" (Ibid.). The bitter feeling of being strange appears when the Palestinians become aware of the fact they will never return to their land. Homecoming is no more than a dream which will never come true. Crying is the only way that can help them to overcome these bad feelings. Being traumatized and depressed makes them reach the point of weeping easily, and crying shows lack of consolation. According to a case study by Freud, some people weep or cry to console themselves (1893-1895/2010, p.147). Abu Qais was "suddenly filled with a bitter feeling of a stranger, and for a moment he thought he was on the point of weeping" (*Men*, 1991, p.10), which clearly shows that Abu Qais is a traumatized person suffering from alienation. Crying and weeping seem to make Abu Qais feel better and help him reduce the bitter feelings causing him pain.

Men also includes imagery of blackness, hell, and light indicating that none of Kanafani's characters is satisfied with a life marked by belatedness and gloomy memories. The hopelessness of major characters makes them seek material security to cover up their agony and loss. They think that money can recompense their weakness and help them to get out of misery; "the heart of the earth had been pushing its difficult way towards the light from the utmost depth of hell" (Ibid., p.9). Money for them is the light in which they can get out of the difficult life in refugee camps. These camps are overcrowded and the refugees live in shared rooms or tents that lack the basic necessities of life. The camps enhance the feeling of alienation and blackness of their life; "like black eternity" (Ibid., p.10). Money may help them to get rid of a bleak prosaic life so they cross long distances in order to find "a crust of bread" (Ibid., p.11) ignoring their feelings of shame.

In addition, Kanafani personifies the desert as a main character, making it breathing, giving opinions and comments like a human being. Personalizing the desert shows the Palestinians' mysterious and terrible life, making their tragedy more traumatic for those who left their fertile lands. The orchards and olive trees left behind "ten olive trees with twisted trunks that brought down olives and goodness every spring" (Ibid., p.15) are replaced with desert which reflects the uprooted life, loss, and alienation that the Palestinians suffer from in the refugee camps in their homeland and in the neighbouring countries.

CONCLUSION

Kanafani's articulation of the life of Palestinian refugees reflects an awareness of their tragic losses. In *Men*, a web of human, social, historical, political and cultural associations conveys the plight of a traumatized nation. Characters in the novella illustrate trauma in its psychological as well as its physical side. Though their bodies seem in good health, Marwan, Assad, and Abu Qais are psychologically and mentally burdened by their inability to lead a satisfactory decent life. At different points in the novella, feelings of helplessness, shame, abandonment, anxiety, and confusion haunt them. As for Abul Khaizuran, he is both physically and psychologically traumatized. Rendered impotent by war, he remains incapable of evading the bitterness and shame connected with his condition. Throughout the novella, trauma can be noticed in encounters and dialogues among characters. Flashbacks and memories are also used to express the unspeakable. Furthermore, imagery of the desert and the black bird add to the bleakness of the scene. *Men* does not only give us examples of traumatized characters, but it also effectively communicates this trauma to the reader

through its narrative technique of employing flashbacks, memories, and recurrent images.

Note: This article began as a chapter in an MA thesis entitled post-colonial trauma in selected Arabic Fictions by Lana Waleed (Second author above) defended at the Hashemite University in April 2017.

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