

## The Dream of Return in Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*

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### Abstract

Home is the place where we are supposed to feel the most secure, comfortable and safe. However, such are the vagaries of human existence; that it is this sanctuary which comes under threat from various forces. Ghassan Kanafani, in his fiction, has repeatedly highlighted this problem as it was (and continues to be) faced by several Palestinians in the face of Israeli extremist atrocities. Even while highlighting the problem, Kanafani staunchly advocates the need to hold on to one's home, even in the face of extreme adversity. *Returning to Haifa*, on which this paper specifically focuses, is a powerful case in point. This paper attempts to analyse how through the trials of one displaced family, Kanafani has tried to show the need to fight for one's homeland; because once it is given up, even if we do return later to try to pick up the threads, the narrative often changes beyond our control by then.

**Keywords:** Displacement, Resistance, Home, quest for identity, Nakba, Fidayeen

“When I went to the UN in 1974, the Zionists organized a demonstration with banners reading, ‘Arafat go home’. I said, ‘This is exactly what I said, ‘This is exactly what I want; this is what I came here for.’” (Arafat: UN, 1974)

These are the words of the great Palestinian resistance leader, Yassir Arafat in 1974 when he went to United Nation as a Peace convoy and to submit a petition that the PLO be recognised as the only organization which represents the Palestinian identity in all international assemblies. These words reflect the pain of an individual who has lost his land due to occupation. He believed in peaceful methods, as do millions and millions of Palestinians who are living in exile due to illegal occupation of their country by the Zionist forces and want to go back to the land to which they belong. This issue has been raised by many Palestinian writers in their writings and Ghassan Kanafani is one of them.

Kanafani was born in Acre in 1936, and lived in Jaffa where he was forced to flee along with thousands of Palestinians. They were displaced after the catastrophe of 1948, under the pressure of the Zionist oppression. He stayed with his family for a short period in

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the South of Lebanon from where he moved to Damascus with his family. He lived his life as a fighter holding his pen like a gun shooting at the Israeli Zionists by his writings. His revolutionary literature and his ideology against the occupiers and the oppressors led to his untimely death, as his car was bombed in Hazmieh in Beirut in 1972 by the Israeli Mossad.

*Returning to Haifa* (1969) is one of Ghassan Kanafani's novellas which portrays the dream of each Palestinian living in exile in refugee camps or as migrants in other countries away from their homeland. The Palestinians have been suffering a lot since the Israeli occupation had taken place in 1948. This is one of Kanafani's masterpieces in which he has given a strong message to the Palestinians as well as the Arab world that they should not leave their homeland at any cost. Through this novella, he also wants to convey another message to the world in general and the superpower countries in particular that they don't have any intrinsic right to colonize the weaker nations, for looting their lands and robbing their properties. Superior military or economic clout can never be a justification on the part of the powerful nations to impose their will on countries not that well equipped.

This paper aims to look at how Kanafani uses the powerful medium of words to highlight the stolen rights of Palestinians during the existent occupation and the Palestinians' right to return back to their usurped land. It also argues that the nation which is oppressed once has not the right to oppress another nation but it has the right to resist the oppressors to achieve their freedom.

The novella, *Returning to Haifa* is about the tragedy of Said and his wife, the family representing just one of the thousands of families forced to flee from Haifa, one of the Palestinian seashore cities, after the Zionists' invasion. The tragedy of displacement for a simple city took place in 1948. As it has been described in the words of Kanafani:

“Morning, Wednesday, April 21, 1948. Haifa, the city, was not expecting anything, in spite of the fact that it was filled with dark tension. Thunder came abruptly from the east, from the heights of Mount Carmel. Mortar shells flew across the city's center, pelting the Arab quarters. (153)”

And this brought catastrophe in the city and the native innocent Palestinians had to flee from their own ancestral homes to live the life of refugees in alien lands. Though the situation is completely adverse for them, still these refugees are always optimistic that one day they will return to the home which they were compelled to leave. Kanafani has raised this vital issue because he believed that whether it was Nakba of 1948 or 1967, Palestinians shouldn't have left their homes. He is of the view that by leaving their homes they have easily paved the way for the outsiders to settle in the homes which they had built with much sweat and toil and dreams. This issue is very sensitively highlighted by the author, drawing at times from his own experiences.

The tragedy of Said and his wife, Safiyya was that they were not able to bring their five month old son, while fleeing in the wake of barbaric invasion. The boy was left alone in the house as a result, to be gifted along with their home, to one of the Jewish occupier

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families. The bereaved parents lived with their pain and sorrow for several years. When the door was opened for the Palestinians to visit the city twenty years later, Said and his wife decided to visit Haifa. When they returned there, they found that the house now belongs to a Jewish family, and their son, who was “Khaldoun” has become “Dov”. With the changing of name his ethnicity also has changed and now he is a son of the Jewish family, a soldier in Israeli army who has complete allegiance and loyalty towards the Israeli and is fighting against his own people, against his own land with the oppressors. This is because he has been brought up in the hands of Jewish family and believes what they say because he consider them their parents. Though he knew the reality that they are not his real parents, still twenty years of upbringing matters a lot for him. So much so that he is not able to see that he is fighting for the wrong people, who do not belong to their lands and who have come from Europe and are the reason for the sufferings of his fellow Palestinians to whom he belongs. But he doesn't accept the reality and to some extent refuses to recognise his Arab origins, and roots, moreover declaring that he stands at the other end of the confrontation. This matter made Said, who was opposed to his young son “Khalid” who left behind in "Ramallah" from the resistance against the occupier's engagement. Because of continuous illegal occupation and the atrocities by the Zionist forces many young men have chosen the path of armed resistance to safeguard their country because they think it is the only solution to their problem. As peacemaker, Yassir Arafat once said in the assembly of United Nation representing Palestine, “I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter's gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand.” (Arafat: UN, 1974)

This was a clear indication from his side that if his peace initiative will not be accepted then he can also take the other path of resistance. In the story, Said's son Khalid also believed in the way of resistance, which his father was opposed to. Having lost his elder son, Khaldun twenty years back, he did not want to lose his younger son at any cost. But after seeing his lost son in enemy's uniform and on the enemy's side, Said undergoes a transformation-- he now wishes to see his younger son, Khalid, as a great fighter against the occupiers. He challenges his lost son:

Maybe your first battle will be with a *fidai* named Khalid. Khalid is my son. I beg you notice that I did not say he's your brother. As you said, man is a cause. Last week Khalid joined The *fidayeen*. Do you know why we named him Khalid and not Khaldun? Because we always thought we'd find you, even if it took twenty years. But it didn't happen. We didn't find you, and I don't believe we will find you. (182)

This is the agony of those Palestinian families who have not only lost their homes but also their family in the catastrophe of 1948 and 1967.

In this novella, Ghassan Kanafani draws a new awareness that began to take shape after the catastrophe of 1967. Said's family who left their child behind, they discovered that:

Man is the cause, and Palestine is not restored for the memories, it needs a hard working step to lighten the future. And when they found it he was lost because he rejects his identity and favour people who have committed crime against his own people. Said reflect his agony in front of his lost son by saying, “We didn’t find you, and I don’t believe we will find you. (182).

Said’s tragedy and the tragedy of the absent nation appears here, the moment it strikes the truth. One of the major themes in *Returning to Haifa* is searching for the truth which has been formed by the dramatic defeat. The choice is not in the hand of the son who lost or the son, who survived. It is a choice of a rebellious son against his father to make the present and to frame the past in a different image. That is highlighted in the cover page of the *Ghassan Kanafani Palestine’s Children Return to Haifa & Other Short Stories*, “At once lyrical, Uplifting, and tragic, the novella and stories in Kanafani’s Palestine’s Children explore the need to recover the past, the lost homeland, by action. They emerged from the author’s keen understanding of a bitter political situation. But their deeper gift is to reveal in literature the plight of oppressed peoples everywhere.” Perhaps these words are on the cover of the novel *Return to Haifa* and are the best expression of what was intended by the writer through his novella.”

*Returning to Haifa* is a model of the martyr Ghassan Kanafani’s literary writings, marked as he is as one of the pioneers of resistance literature. His novels have resonated with the directors and a number of them have been adapted for the screen, such as ‘*Returning to Haifa*’ the movie, ‘*Knife*’ is an adaptation of novella ‘*All That Left For You*’ and ‘*Disillusioned*’ is the adaptation of novella, ‘*Men in the Sun*’.

In *Returning to Haifa*, Kanafani argues and condemns those people who left their homes even though they were oppressed to leave their homelands. Kanafani describes two major settings in this novel, the time and the place talk of the most important and black dates in Palestinian history (1948-1967).

During Nakba 1948 and 1967, millions and millions of Palestinians lost their lands, their properties which their ancestors had owned since centuries fell into the hands of outsiders who don’t belong to the land. And they were forced to live the lives of refugees on other lands but they had the hope to return back. This pain is reflected by Mahmoud Darwish in his poem, ‘*Diary of a Palestinian Wound*’:

We shall remain wakeful, we remember!  
Al-Carmel lives in us, like a wonder:  
On our eyelids lives Galilee grass,  
And the waters of our river do pass  
Through the texture of our native soil;  
We write no poetry, but we do toil:  
Twenty years before the June disaster,

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We lived in fetters, dear beloved sister!  
Those sad shadows that are darkling  
Upon your eyes, to eliminate sparkling  
Happiness, are but our long, dark night  
Against which we continued to fight  
When you sang, dear skylark,  
Palestine's dawn shone from the dark!

Against which we continued to fight.

Kanafani, like many other Palestinians, has also raised the issue of Palestinians right to return back to their lands and this he has focused in *Returning to Haifa* also. He wished that his fellow Palestinians should return to the land to which they belonged. Alon Harel in his paper, 'Whose Home is it? Reflections of the Palestinians' Interest in Return supports the notion that Palestinians should return to their lands as it belonged to them. He states that:

The Palestinian exile has not only forced Palestinians out of their physical environment; it has uprooted them from the community and shattered their fundamental social structures. Perhaps, it could be argued, the right to return rests on the interest in restoring one's social environment —the network of friends and relatives who provide one with a sense of social identity. (354)

This is what Kanafani has reflected in most of his works and it is the right of the Palestinians to return back to their lands from where they were forcefully evicted.

Apart from all these themes, the presence of realism in Kanafani's works makes his literature rich and attractive to his readers. He uses metaphors, similes, personification to describe the time, the locations, and the characters that make his style unique and different from other writers. Moreover, Kanafani records most of the tragic events in the Palestinian history through his literary works particularly in *Return to Haifa*. Fadi al Naqib has a great admiration for Kanafani and says that "His fiction offers entry into the Palestinian experience of a conflict that has anguished the people of Middle-East for more than a century— and that caused his own death." (Back cover)

The Israeli Mossad realized that the pen of Gassan Kanafani is much more powerful than a nuclear bombing; therefore they assassinated him in 1972. The Israeli occupation may have succeeded in murdering his body but his soul and his ideology are still alive in every Palestinian's blood.

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