

50 Years Later

The Message That Still Hasn't Gotten Through

By Heithem Adnan

I know not what to ask myself after reading the chapter entitled «The Message Which Arrived 32 Years Later» in Ghassan Kanafani's story, «Um Saad». Shall I ask myself if history is repeating itself? Should I say that great men truly possess the ability to foresee the future? Shall I ask whether our intellectuals have been able to bring home this message after fifty years? Or maybe I should ask about the fate of a people and revolution whose leadership was incapable of reading this people's history and heritage correctly?

I do not know, but when I read the chapter, I realized that the message has not gotten through, contrary to what Ghassan Kanafani wrote, that the message arrived thirty-two years later.

That day Um Saad went to Ghassan. She was distraught, and he asked, «What has happened, Um Saad?»

She pulled out a much folded and wrinkled piece of paper from her bosom, and thrust it towards him: «Hassan has read this to me. Ever since, I have been troubled.»

Naturally the letter had come from her son, Saad, who represents the real revolutionaries. The letter spoke of his comrade, Laith, who had been taken prisoner by the Zionists. Saad had discovered that Laith's family might turn to their cousin, a certain Abdel Moula, to mediate for their son. Abdel Moula was known as a collaborator, besides being one of the richer feudalists. Ghassan asked Um Saad why such a thing should disturb her. She replied that Saad had written to ask her to go to Laith's mother to stop her from turning to collaborators to beg favors for revolutionaries. Laith had told Saad that if anything happened to him, and his family tried to write to Abdel Moula, then Saad would be left with no alternative but to shoot them - pure and simple, to shoot the family of a revolutionary, if they turn to those who do not participate in the revolution, but plot to nip the bud of revolutionary blood before it blooms.

Um Saad was completely confused, and Ghassan asked if she was sure that Laith's family had written to Abdel Moula. She was not sure and must see.

Here I asked myself whether Laith's family, in 1986, would write to Mubarak or Hassan II or Hanna Siniara or their 'martyr' Zafer Al Masri, to beg favors for him now, in his current dilemma. I wondered whether

the likes of Saad should shoot Laith's family or not.

My uncertainty increased with that of Um Saad as I continued to read and found her saying, «As soon as I heard Abdel Moula's name when Hassan was reading to me, I shook as if evil spirits had possessed me...»

This, of course, was because Um Saad was sure that Abdel Moula was the one who had killed Fadhl, the revolutionary of 1936, although «he did not carry a gun and shoot.» When Ghassan asked how a person could kill another without carrying a gun and shooting, she said: «In the revolution of 1936, Fadhl went up to the mountains. He was barefoot and carried a Martin rifle... He was away for a long time.» Um Saad was still at the beginning of her life then. She used to hear about things without completely comprehending them. She spoke of the six-month strike and the peasants who carried arms and went up to the mountains. Now, however, matured by life's bitter experiences, she remembers the events and says: «Then came the letter from the Arab kings, and the men returned to their homes.»

Then I wondered, «Did not a similar letter descend on us from the Arab kings assembled at Fez in 1982?»

Um Saad had this to add to Ghassan: «The men returned to their homes... Now, if you ask me how, I wouldn't know. However, I do remember one event clearly.» Naturally, this event was the revolutionary Fadhl's heeding the letter of the Arab kings, whether in 1936, 1982 or thereafter. «Fadhl returned with those who returned to the village. He came down from the hills barefooted as he had ascended. The road must have been long, for he reached the square as the last ones reached the neighboring village. His clothes and feet were torn. He was completely exhausted and drained.»

I don't believe his condition differed much from that of those 'Fadhils' who reached the squares of Tunis, Algiers, Khartoum, Damascus or Sanaa after leaving Beirut.

Um Saad went on to recall... Now nobody remembers with her or can read her thoughts: «The square was teeming with people and Fadhl could not find a place except on the threshold of a home at the end of the square. He sat down to catch his breath and try to take care of his torn feet that were filled with dirt and thorns and blood. I was standing

with the women, not far from him. I wouldn't have noticed him to begin with, had I not heard a woman say that it was Fahdil who works in the oil press, one of the first to go up in the mountains. The people began to applaud. We looked up and saw Abdel Moula ascending a table. He spoke and was applauded. I do not remember now what he said, but no doubt he spoke of the revolution, of victory, and of the English and the Jews. I do not know why at that moment I looked at Fadhl. I saw him stretch out his arms to the people, saying, «Hey you, it was I whose feet were torn, and now he is the one you clap for?»

I do not know why, but when I read these words, I imagined pictures of stout-hearted fighters sitting exhausted in the squares of Tunis, Khartoum or Sanaa. One of the sons of King Hassan stands, speaking of victory amidst the applause of the Arab masses. I do not know why I began to imagine the pictures of heroes of successful guerrilla operations, pictures of the destruction wreaked by vengeful Zionist air raids, and pictures of tremendous demonstrations in the occupied territories, carrying pictures of Yaser Arafat.

However, my mental wanderings were cut short. Ghassan Kanafani summoned me to continue reading his story. He wrote that Um Saad «again spread out the piece of white paper, frayed by folding, before my eyes.» At this point, I felt that the words of Ghassan were like hammer blows on my head. I felt as if he had returned from the grave, the parts of his body reassembled once again in defiance of the Zionists' explosives. He rose to grasp each one of us with what remains of Palestinian feeling, to shake us and say: «Go and tell Laith's family in Tunis, in Sanaa, in Baghdad and everywhere, 'No, do not go to Abdel Moula or Mubarak or Hassan II or any one of his family, or else I will raise my gun and shoot you.'»

Um Saad once again intervenes to say: «Now, Abdel Moula once again, after twenty years, can you imagine?... How can such a thing happen?... I am not discussing Laith... Fadhl died afterwards. Some say he died of tuberculosis at the oil press. Others say he was killed in the 1948 war. Still others say that he left Palestine in 1949, returning afterwards, only to be killed on the road. However, this is not our subject.»