

The Peasant and the Land

in the Literature of Ghassan Kanafani

This is a translation of an essay written by Dr. Faisal Darraj on the occasion of the eighteenth anniversary of the martyrdom of Ghassan Kanafani, Palestinian author, member of the PFLP's Politbureau and founding editor of its weekly magazine, *Al Hadaf*. Ghassan Kanafani made an immeasurable contribution to both the Palestinian revolution and Arabic literature before his life was cut short on July 8, 1972, when Zionist agents booby-trapped his car outside his home in Beirut.

When Ghassan Kanafani wrote his famous study about the 1936 revolt in Palestine, he did not hide his affection for the peasant masses who were great in terms of their simplicity and readiness to struggle and sacrifice. Their simple consciousness did not allow them to pose many questions, rather it was as if it urged them to wage the battle without speculations of any sort. Also for this reason they were bound to a leadership that knew little about their lives, and did not appreciate their courage and sacrifices. That leadership, as Kanafani stated, was committed to leading, not to fighting. It was motivated by selfishness, assigning the right to lead to the haves and martyrdom to the have-nots, after depriving them of the right to make decisions.

Reading history gave Kanafani knowledge of the peasants and their patriotic role. It also made him feel the bond between the peasant and the land; for the peasant is adept in the language of the seasons, and can read in the book of the land without stumbling as fluently as any studious pupil reads his texts. In Kanafani's novel *The Lover*, we find a portrait of such a peasant, who is exalted to a mythical level. He walks on smoldering embers with confidence, speaking to the wind, seeking impunity in nature, hiding in the foothills and the valleys, chased by the British army that is unable to catch him simply because he is the symbol of the land; and it is quite impossible to arrest the land.

The intimate relationship between the peasant and the land makes their separation tragic, because land, being much more than just property, is a mirror, an identity and a belonging. Kanafani describes this in his short story *Until We Return*. Here land is not a mere landscape or a geographical space; it is a living being. The fields



are full of stories and fables, and abundant with details that constitute his life and history; for land is a mirror of the human being, in as much as the human is a mirror of the land. He recognizes its details as he does the minutia of his own life.

In his collection of short stories entitled *Of Men and Rifles*, Kanafani writes about a peasant «who knows every stone and every tree,» if not the history of every tree, for the trees and the stones are an appendage of him. While they remain silent in his absence, he, on the other hand, dies if he is separated from them. His memory is the mirror of the land, while the land is the substance of his memory. If human memory is the sum of a person's character and if it determines his behavior, the peasant's disposition and demeanor can only be corporeal through his relationship with the land which he ploughed and nurtured. Thus, tending the land conceives the peasant's character and determines his scope.

When the peasant leaves his land, he carries a part of it with him. This linkage of the human being and the

land is symbolized by the planting of grapevines by Kanafani's character Um Sa'ad wherever she goes. This symbolic relationship makes the poor Palestinian in *Men in the Sun* dream of a house surrounded by grapevines. His recollection of the olive and orange trees is what motivates him to make the fateful journey to Kuwait. The peasant lives the land, and when he leaves he recreates it or carries it in his memory, dreaming relentlessly of returning. In this framework, land appears as a noble being that is superior to other beings. It is the symbol of stability and continuity, and it provides security and a life of dignity.

Expressing the relationship between herself and the grapevine, Um Sa'ad says, «it does not need much water,» because the plant, the marvelous offspring of the land, derives its water from the moisture between the land and air. Thus the plant appears as a secret which cannot be revealed.

Land is the profile of the human; therefore defending the land is, in essence, defending the human. The peasant who becomes a commando does not carry a gun out of love for fighting or for the sake of privileges, but in order to restore that lost part of himself. This made Um Sa'ad speak about two kinds of camps: the first symbolizes humiliation, submissiveness and exile, while the second camp is that of the commando, deriving its beauty and integrity from the intimacy between the Palestinian and the land from which he was exiled. In Kanafani's story *Of Men and Rifles*, the episode does not evolve around the rifle as an object of beauty, but rather around the love of a human for the land. This is essentially the longing for justice and dignity, since land is a precondition for an upright life, free from alienation and exploitation.

In addition to the political form which delineates Kanafani's works, in their essence they deal with positive human values such as dignity, justice and freedom. His novels and short stories defend noble values. Indicative of these values is the extensive role of the peasant and his relationship with the land, particularly his struggle and sacrifice.

The peasant's circumstances elicit sympathy and respect. He lives a hard yet simple life, struggling against