

The Woman in Three of Ghassan Kanafani's Stories

In July, we marked the martyrdom of Ghassan Kanafani, Palestinian writer and Politbureau member of the PFLP, who was assassinated by Zionist agents in 1972. In remembrance of his rich contribution to Palestinian literature, chiefly through short – story writing, we bring the following analysis by Mohamed Idris.

by Mohamed Idris

In many works of Ghassan Kanafani, the woman plays a peculiar moral role whose ultimate significance lies well beyond the immediate world of the works themselves. This essay attempts to trace and analyze this role in three of his short stories: «Till We Return,» «A Letter from Gaza» and «The Land of Sad Oranges.» But first let us see what each of them is about.

I. «Till We Return»

Set in the Naqab desert (South Palestine) around the year 1956, this story depicts a peculiar day in the life of a Palestinian freedom fighter. Tense and excited, he is crossing the desert to carry out a mission against an Israeli post erected on what was once his own land, the land which was the scene of the happiest days, as well as the most horrible hours, in his life. Hence his tension and excitement. While his feet were «wrestling with the hot desert sand, his mind was a racetrack for countless memories and feelings.» His tension and excitement rise as he comes nearer to his ex – home, now his target. He remembers what his commander told him: «It's your land. Didn't you live there? Well, you know it better than anyone. In one of the fields they have erected a water tower to irrigate the land which was always yours and your neighbours'. I think you understand. The amount of dynamite you have is sufficient...»

The smell of his land, which he left seven years ago, stirs in him memories which he has always feared to recall. Then, in a flashback, he revisualizes the events of his last day on his land. Here Kanafani presents three successive pictures – actually two, the second being implicit in the third. The first one shows Jewish gunmen sweeping the plantations and terrorizing their inhabitants into leaving them. The hero (who is to become the freedom fighter the story is about) realizes that he has to leave, at least temporarily:

He pulled his wife by the hand and set off, but before he reached the gate of his field, he drew close to her and was stunned by a big tear in one of her wide eyes. He tried to resist the cruel feeling which that tear injected into his veins. But he found himself arrested by the heart – breaking questions which his wife's tear triggered in and around him: Where are we going? What of your land? Hadn't you better pay back to the earth what you owe it, even if you have to pay from your blood and flesh?

Speechless, he took her by the hand again and pulled her back to the field. His soul's ear couldn't help responding to the good call from the wide eyes. Then, fusing the second picture into the third, Kanafani presents the latter thus:

That night, they hanged his wife from the old tree between the mountain and the open square. He could see her hanging, stark naked, with her hair, which they had shaved off her head, tied round her neck. Bright black blood was flowing from her mouth. It was hard to believe that just an hour before she had filled the square with bullets, fire and blood. They had skinned his back with their whips, and then tied him to the tree opposite to the one on which they hanged his wife. They tied him there to stare, helpless as a corpse, at his

wife, and cry out like a madman. When dying, she bade him «Farewell,» they filled her mouth with earth. They let him go into the desert, believing that his memories would soon kill him.

But had they expected that these memories, instead of killing him, would drive him back to shatter with his dynamite the «peace» they had founded on terror and murder, they would certainly have never been so «generous» with him.

The flood of memories, we are told, is stopped by the great explosion of the giant water tower. As he reaches the camp, he finds the commander waiting for him by his own tent.

«Has it gone alright?» He nodded, too tired to speak. «Are you alright?» He nodded again, more firmly, and added, «Have you prepared my mission for tomorrow?» Surprised, the commander said, «No. You can't go on a mission tomorrow. You must rest.» «I can,» he readily retorted. «Till when, do you think, can you go on like this?» «Till we return.»

II. «A Letter from Gaza»

Written in 1956, this story, too, depicts a crucial day in the life of the narrator, the letter writer. He is a young Gaza teacher who has been working in Kuwait both to support his mother and his dead brother's family, and to save up the money needed to cover his long – desired study of civil engineering in the US. His friend Mustafa, who has already been there, has recently sent him word to the effect that he, the narrator, has been admitted to the University of California, and that his residence there has been secured.

The action, presented through the narrator's letter of response to Mustafa in the US, actually begins with the narrator having recently come back to Gaza for his summer vacation. We are told that Gaza, his hometown, has always seemed to him an uninteresting, uninspiring place for a young man like him to live in for good; he has therefore been looking forward to leaving it for more stimulating and promising horizons. The US has seemed especially attractive to him. Thus the good news included in his friend's letter is expected to herald the chance for him to materialize an old dream. But in his own letter, the narrator surprises Mustafa with his irrevocable decision to remain in Gaza, and never leave it. He writes:

When I took my vacation in June...I found Gaza the same as you and I had always known it...like a rusty shell that the waves had cast onto a sandy shore...Gaza with its narrow lanes and their special smell, the smell of defeat and squalor.

That evening I bought some apples and went to the hospital to visit my niece Nadia, the beautiful girl with thirteen springs behind her. I knew that her mother and mine were hiding something from me, something they could not say to me by word of mouth...I loved Nadia – indeed, I liked all her generation, who had been suckled on defeat and homelessness.

Nadia was lying in bed. In her eyes, there was sublime silence, and in the black center of each there glowed a still tear. Her face was quiet and motionless, like that of an aggrieved, suffering prophet. Though a child, she looked much older than a child...

«Uncle, you are back from Kuwait?»

«Yes, Nadia. I have brought you presents, many presents, from Kuwait. When you recover...I'll give them to you. Among them are the red trousers which you asked of me.» It was a lie that escaped from my mouth in a confused effort to ease the tension of the situation. But Nadia shuddered, as if