

A Return to Nowhere: Palestinian Exile in Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa* and *All That's Left to You*

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Abstract:

This research paper will be exploring the Palestinian exodus of 1948 which displaced the native Palestinians from their own country, the Palestine. It will examine the validation and possibility of Palestinians' right to return to the historic land of Palestine. Apart from these issues, the paper is also aimed at discussing the Palestinian situation after the events of the year 1948 which resulted in the establishment of the State of Israel and, the subsequent, expulsion of indigenous Arab population. It also attempts to unfold the nature of Israeli occupation as a settler colonial project. The critical evaluation of Ghassan Kanafani's exiled characters in his fictional works, *Returning to Haifa* and *All That's Left to You*, is one of the purposes of this paper. His characters' exile experience and their resistance for a return to their homeland will also be analyzed in the research paper.

Keywords: Exodus, Displacement, Occupation, Colonial, Exile, Return, Homeland.

The 1948 Zionist assault on Palestinians, referred to as Nakba (the disaster) by Palestinians, led to their massacre, mass expulsion, and the loss of property and the homeland. After the Zionist aggression "at least 80 percent of the Palestinians who lived in the major part of Palestine upon which Israel was established- more than 77 percent of Palestine's territory- became refugees" (Sa'di, Abu-Lughod, "*Nakba*" 3). According to Ilan Pappé, the Israeli historian, during the 1948 Palestinian exodus "close to 800,000 [Palestinians], had been uprooted, 531 villages had been destroyed" (Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* XIII). Those who became stateless were either thrown into refugee camps or forced to live in Arab neighborhoods. Initially, they believed that their displacement is temporary and, when the situation becomes normal, they will be allowed to return to their country. Unfortunately, they are still waiting for a return to their houses in Palestine. The exiled Palestinians were also betrayed by their own people, the neighboring Arab states during Palestinian tragedy. Some of these Arab states, such as Jordan which annexed a Palestinian territory, West Bank, during the upheaval, made a compromise with Israeli forces for their own

personal and political gains. Though United Nations General Assembly's Resolution 194 (III), which was adopted on December 11, 1948, promises a swift return of Palestinians to their lost homes, yet Israel never allowed their entry into the State (Kassim, Al-Shaybani, *The Palestine Yearbook of International Law* 468).

As of 2015, the number of registered refugee Palestinians across the globe has reached 5,149,742 (Unrwa.org/sites/default/files/unrwa_in_figures_2015.pdf). Once expelled from their country, these homeless Palestinians are forced to live at the mercy of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) which provides them with humanitarian aids such as medicines, food items, education and shelter.

Edward Said in his book, *Reflections of Exile and Other Essays* (2000), defines exile as “strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between the self and its true home” (Said, 173). Unfortunately, the Palestinians were unable to find their “true home” during all these years of struggle. In her essay on exile, *Return to Half-Ruins: Memory, Postmemory, and Living History in Palestine*, Lila Abu- Lughod discusses her traumatic experiences in exile and reflects on the issue of return of the diasporic Palestinians. She observes:

“Awda means return. For diasporic Palestinians, the charged term evokes nostalgia for the homeland. They were forced to flee in 1948 and a reversal of the traumatic dispersion that sundered families, ruined livelihoods, and thrust Palestinians into humiliating refugee camps or individual adventures to rebuild lives armed with little more than birth certificates, keys to home left behind, and the stigma of having somehow lost their country to an alien people. The political insistence on the “right of return” is a demand for fighting a moral wrong. It is also a demand that the story of that expulsion not be erased. (Sa’di, Abu- Lughod, *Nakba* 77)

Ghassan Kanafani (1936-72), the Palestinian writer, journalist and the editor, himself became the victim of 1948 fall of Palestine when he, along with his family, was forced into exile at the age of twelve. During his stay in refugee camp, Kanafani experienced the brutal pain and sufferings of the exiled Palestinians. Being a teacher at one of the refugee camps' schools, Kanafani closely observed the disheartening Palestinian situation. His personal experiences find enough expression in his fictional and political writings. His novels and short stories are a manifestation of his people's tragic life experiences and their never ending desire to return to their homeland.

Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa* (2000) is a painful account of an exiled Palestinian couple's, Said and Safiyya, forced expulsion and their traumatic life afterwards. The couple, like Kanafani himself, is a victim of 1948 Zionist onslaught on Palestinians with a purpose of establishing a Jewish national home in Palestine. This expulsion affects the Palestinian couple on both the levels, personal and the national. On one hand, it leaves them stateless while on the other, it deprives them their five months-old child, Khaldun, whom the couple has left behind in panic situation. Through the devastating personal experience of the couple, Kanafani symbolizes the whole Palestinian community which is living in exile.

The loss of their child makes their lives more vulnerable and pathetic. Said, the protagonist of the novella, tries hard to go back to his house to look for his child but he fails due to the imposition of Israeli restrictions.

After 1967 Israeli occupation of West Bank and Gaza, the couple gets the opportunity to visit their lost home in Haifa but this temporary return proves to be another disaster in their lives. Upon reaching their old home after twenty years' exile, the couple is informed about their lost son's transition from being a Palestinian Arab to, now, an Israeli Jew who is raised by a Jewish couple, Iphrat and Miriam.

Through this identity transition, Kanafani points out the terrible consequences of Zionist invasion of Palestine. He presents the case of Khaldun as a human occupation which is equally tragic than the occupation of the geographical territory. For Said, the loss of his country and the son is a matter of "disgrace" for every single Palestinian (Kanafani, "*Palestine's Children*" 159). Khaldun's refusal to acknowledge Said and Safiyya as parents forces Said to reconsider his decision of barring Khalid, Said's another son, from joining Palestine resistance. Now, he wishes to see Khalid joining resistance and fighting for the liberation of his house and the country. For Khalid, "Palestine is something worthy of a man bearing arms for, dying for" (Kanafani, "*Palestine's Children*" 187). Said believes that this momentary return to the lost house is meaningless because it's still under Israeli occupation. Before leaving for Ramallah, he warns Miriam, the Jewish lady, and Khaldun (now named Dov, a Jew) about a decisive future war that will facilitate Palestinians' return to their homeland, the Palestine.

Kanafani's another novel, *All That's Left to You* (2004), also discusses the theme of exile and return, in Palestinian context. The novel is a manifestation of the destruction of Palestinian social life after Zionist occupation of Palestine. The novel explores how the Zionist settlement in Palestine has destroyed the familial structure of Palestinian society. On thematic level, it documents the separation of a Palestinian family in the wake of Zionist invasion of the city of Jaffa in Palestine. Kanafani, through the miseries of the family, manifests the aftermath effects of the Palestinian exodus in the lives of those who are living in exile. Hamid, the protagonist, is one such unfortunate

expelled Palestinian who has separated from his mother and now lives, with his sister, Maryam, in exile. Like hundreds of Palestinians, Hamid was forced to flee his hometown in Jaffa during Zionist attack on the city. While in exile, he feels a sense of identity crisis and dreams of returning to his house. Hamid's sister, Maryam, is also a victim of Palestinian exile which forces her to commit adultery with a traitor, Zakaria. Kanafani's representation of the fragmentation of Hamid's family is nothing but a direct consequence of unethical Zionist invasion. The desert, in the novel, is represented as a "living creature" which has been exploited by a foreign enemy, the Zionist forces (Kanafani, *All That's Left to You* 1).

Kanafani compares Maryam's exploited body with captured Palestinian land to express the idea of Zionist assault on the Palestinian territories. For Hamid, after leaving his sister's home in Gaza, exile has taken away all that he had, from being separated from his mother and country to losing his sister to a traitor like Zakaria. Hamid's journey to his mother in Jordan, which can be seen as a possible attempt to return to his homeland, does not end anywhere but in the middle of the desert of Jaffa. His nightlong confrontation with a Jewish soldier, in desert, is expressive of his struggle and commitment for Palestinian resistance. Hamid, being struck in desert till the end of the novel, shows his situation of being a homeless and stateless Palestinian who does not have any place to return.

So Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa* and *All That's Left to You* represent exiled Palestinians' struggle for national liberation and their aspirations of returning to their homeland which constitutes an inseparable part of the Palestinian national identity.

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