

## **Children under Occupation: Conflicts, Camps and Agential Identity in Ghassan**

### ***Kanafani's Palestine's Children: Returning to Haifa and Other Stories***

#### **Abstract**

A Palestinian prominent writer, Ghassan Kanafani's writings became a vehicle for transporting his activism and advocacy for the Palestine struggles. His experience as a teacher in the refugee camp made him understand the untold world of Palestinian refugee children. This article closely analyses the selected four short stories from his collection of short stories titled *Palestine's Children: Returning to Haifa and Other Stories* (2000), translated by Barbara Harlow and Karen E Riley. The chosen short stories narrate the stories of Palestinian refugee children who are subjected to live in violence, oppression and exile. Every short story in this collection, notably enough, exemplifies the vulnerable positions of these children living amidst the political havoc. The aim of this article is to study the plight of the child characters depicted in selected short stories. The article, by analysing the historical events of Palestine and its repercussions on the Palestinian 'child', foregrounds the precarious agential identity of children in refugee crisis, who are forced to take on adult caretaking roles. His stories mourn the generations of children who live as 'bare life' in these camps. However, it argues that the figure of the child becomes an agent for Kanafani to delineate the Palestinian problems, history and political movement and a symbol for resistance and change.

**Keywords:** Palestinian refugee children, Kanafani's children's stories, Palestinian conflict, refugee camps, Israel-Palestine conflict.

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### ***Kanafani's Palestine's Children: Returning to Haifa and Other Stories***

A West Asian country, Palestine has been fraught with unending political conflicts and a continuing struggle for the land with Israel. This land has been continuously colonised, invaded, attacked, occupied down through history. The protracted conflict and struggle to reclaim the lost land of 'Palestine' has driven many Palestinians into becoming a stateless people living in exile or in refugee camps. From the beginning of the Israeli invasion in 1948 to the recent Gaza war beginning in 2023, Palestinian children have become the main victims of this ongoing conflict. These wars have led to prolonged refugee situations, leading to the birth of entire generations of Palestinian children outside their homeland. The plight of Palestine and its children before and after al-Nakba conflict (1948) are effectively portrayed by the writer Ghassan Kanafani in his short stories. Kanafani was a writer, journalist, teacher and a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). He made his writings as his troops in vindicating the struggle for his homeland. His stories resonate with the historical and political consciousness of the Palestinian struggle. The selected short stories: "The Slope", "A Present for the Holiday", "Dr. Qassim Talks to Eva About Mansur Who Has Arrived in Safad", and "He Was a Child That Day" narrate the Palestinian struggle and oppression through the lives of its child characters. This article, by analyzing the depiction of child characters in Kanafani's selected stories, reveals how Kanafani's children negotiate childhood, conflict and life in the camps. Furthermore, the article also demonstrates how Kanafani has used children as agents in his stories to talk about Palestinian issue, history and political movements.



The Palestinian refugee crises, although begun in 1948 with the establishment of state of Israel, continues into the present with the same ferocity and ramifications. This prolonged crisis has been termed by historian Ilan Pappé as “al-nakba al-mustamirra” (on-going Nakba) (Baroud and Pappé 2018: i), indicating the never-ending Palestinian catastrophe (Nakba) of 1948. From 1948 to the present day, the Palestinian refugee crisis has been instigated by a major conflict in each decade, resulting in numerous deaths and mass expulsion. The method of conflict employed by Israel through the means of dispossession, imprisonment and spatial strangulation, remains unchanged throughout the period. While this is the story of Palestinians in The West Bank and Gaza, Palestinian refugees living in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan in the refugee camps continue to face the crises of their host countries as well as their predicament of precarious lives. The long history of conflict in Palestine, resulting in major refugee crises both in previous and present centuries, has been recorded in voluminous literary works and journalistic accounts.

Born in 1936 in Acre, Palestine, Ghassan Kanafani was a renowned literary figure in Arabic literature. As Elias Khoury (2013) stated: “Kanafani, [was] the boy from Galilee, left Akka (Acre) as a twelve-year-old refugee and spent his all too-brief years—in Damascus, Kuwait, and finally Beirut— searching for home with his words” (87). Kanafani was directly affected by the Palestinian struggle when he went into exile with his family in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. This incident had a severe impact on his political ideologies and literary writing. He was educated in the camp and ended up becoming a teacher for children in refugee camps. He describes his camp experience in one of his interviews:

...biggest influence on my writing is due to reality itself: what I see, my friends’ experiences, relatives, brothers and sisters, and students, my living in the camps with poverty and misery. These are the factors that affected me... I instead prefer to say that the first effect is not due to it, but to reality itself. All the characters in my novels were

inspired by reality, which gave me strength; and not by imagination. Nor did I choose my heroes for artistic [literary] reasons. They were all from the camp, not from outside...So life itself had the biggest influence [on my writing]. (Samidoun)

The image of a Palestinian child is largely used by Kanafani in his literary works due to his belief that children can further the goals of Palestinian liberation. The selected short stories for this article “involves in some way a child, a child who, though victimized by the structures of authority that dominate the social and political world he lives in, nonetheless, by assuming new roles, participates personally in the struggle toward a new and different kind of future” (Karen E Riley and Barbara Harlow 2000: 14). Kanafani has captured the precarious lives of children living in exile as refugees. His child characters, especially set after the al-nakba, function as a prelude to the changing roles of children in Arab society (Ismail Nashef 2023:165). As observed by Katrina Lee Koo (2015), Palestinian children portrayed in Kanafani’s stories exhibit personality traits that showcase the blurring between child and adult. They also portray political commitments and performance of adult duties by becoming caretakers (14). The depiction of different generations expresses the important timeline in the history of Palestine’s struggle. This portrayal of multiple generations reveals how the opinions of previous generations effects younger Palestinians. Nevertheless, the figure of the child becomes an agent in Kanafani’s stories to express the sadness of lost land and the hope for the reclamation of the same land in the future.

In “The Slope” a child narrates the tale of his father to the newly joined teacher Mushin, who himself was a refugee child in the camp. The beginning of the story delves into Mushin’s anxiety about his teaching job. He doubts himself in his new role because of his educational background in the refugee camp. Mushin’s character shows the history of the protracted refugee situation of Palestinians. Furthermore, the situation of refugee schools portrayed in the story shows the mode of camp schools providing education to refugee

children. The story of the father narrated by the child alludes to the story of Palestine and its failure. The namelessness of the child in the story delineates its collective reference to the story of Palestinian children at large. Perhaps, the reference to the rich man, the father's shop and the uncertainty of the father's death in the story indicate the history of Palestine and its struggle with Israel. At the end of the story, Mushin, too, participates in the story of the child and proclaims it as the real incident. This participation of Mushin illustrates summates the ways in which Palestine is living in the youth and children, besides living in exile, thereby surpassing the generations.

As aforementioned, the story of the father could be read as an allegory for the long history of Palestine. The description of the father losing his eyes could refer to the creation of the Israeli state in Palestine land through the annexation of Palestine: "His other eye he had poked out himself one day when he was stitching the thick sole of a heavy man's shoe" (Ghassan Kanafani 2000: 32).. Further, the war of Israel with Palestine to enlarge the Israeli Nation is described metaphorically through the dropping of the peels and shells of food:

Meanwhile the rich man sat on his balcony all day long and all night eating bananas and oranges and almonds and walnuts and throwing away the peels and shells. He threw them over the rails of the balcony of his palace and onto the side of the hill. One morning the hillside was so covered with all these peels and shells that the servants couldn't even find my father's box in the middle of all of them. (33)

The destruction of the father's shop in the above paragraph reveals the failure of Palestinians in combating the advanced Israeli army.

The child continues to narrate the history of the Palestinian struggle by telling to Mushin that his father did not die, referring to the optimism of the Palestinians in regaining the land. The following lines express the optimism of Kanafani: "Summer is coming in a

couple of months and the sun will dry up all the piles of peels and shells, so they won't be so heavy and then my father can move them away from on top of him and go back to the house" (34). Furthermore, when the principal does not believe the child's story, the child says: "'But I'm not crazy. Just go to the rich man's palace and look at his shoes and you'll find little pieces of my father's flesh on them. Maybe you'll even find his eyes and his nose in the sole of one of the shoes ... Just go there...'" (34). The above lines aptly reveal the realities of the Palestinian struggle and serve as a call to everyone to familiarize themselves with the history of the land. Lastly, the tale of Mushin, in addition to the child's story of the father as: "The passers-by refused to help him, and he remained there until he died'" (35), explains the helplessness of Palestinians in their fight and resistance movement. Kanafani, through weaving the story around the child's tale, puts forth the history of Palestine and its memory in the minds of children who are in exile.

The story "A Present for the Holiday" revolves around a phone conversation between two people about presenting Palestinian refugee children with gifts for Christmas. The nameless narrator, who is the protagonist of the story, receives the call late at night and discusses the intention of the person talking on the other side about providing gifts to the children living in the refugee camps. The story begins with the narrator reading the book of Sun Tsi about the tactics of war. This reference to the book conceptualises the subject of the story and the writer's aim at invoking the Palestinian war. The repetition of Tsi's line, "But all that is beside the point..." (43) typifies the bareness of life in the camp after losing the war. Further, the line explains the visceral state of a person living in exile after losing his homeland. The narrator's continuous usage of this line adheres to Edward Said's (2013) remarks on exile: "exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between self and its true home; its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (173). This sadness is pronounced by

the narrator through Tsi's above cited line that refers to the war that has pushed him to move out of his country.

The recollection of the story of Darwish in the refugee camp by the narrator exemplifies the Palestinian refugee children's situation. The narrator describes: "He was very bright, and he wrote the best creative compositions in the class. If he had found something for himself to eat that day, his genius knew no bounds. It was a big camp. They called it..." (44). The above story of Darwish functions as a mockery of the idea of the speaker about providing gifts for children like Darwish, who are 'semi-adults' (Nashef 2023:165) to enjoy playing with toys because of their situation. Further, the lines: "The man at the other end of the line said to me: "It's an excellent idea, don't you think? You'll help us. We want a news campaign in the papers, you know"" (44), explicate the life of refugees that are dependent on the donations and the publicities of the people in power. The narrator's unhappiness about the gifts and presents arises from his childhood experience of living as a refugee and it explains how refugee camps function as "zones of exception that strip the human subject of rights, as crucibles for the production of "bare life" (Giorgio Agamben), "human waste" (Zygmunt Bauman), "undesirables" (Michel Agier), or the "living dead" (Achille Mbembe)" (Debarti Sanyal 2017: 4), disrupting the childhood of the child.

The narrator's experience of waiting for the gift in a Palestinian refugee camp demonstrates 'the bare life' of a child in the camp with meagre resources: "The boxes seemed very far away and we were trembling like a field of sugar cane and hopping about in order to keep the blood flowing in our veins. After a million years, my turn came. A clean starched nurse gave me a red square box" (45). Further, the line: "I remember nothing except the cold, and the ice that manacled my fingers, and the can of soup" (45) implies how survival is the biggest struggle of the child living in the camp. By focusing on the gifts, the story delineates the war and its repercussions on the life of a Palestinian child.

The story “Dr. Qassim Talks to Eva About Mansur Who Has Arrived in Safad” is one among four stories about seventeen-year-old Mansur, who is driven by the ambition of fighting for his Palestine. This story begins with the narration about Mansur’s character by his brother Dr. Qassim, who has married a Jewish woman named Eva. By quoting Habib, Nashef (2023) describes how “Kanafani’s literary children as characters who simultaneously take on children’s and adults’ roles. More importantly, they change in the same literary work, and across different works, exhibiting a continuum of child—adult functions in familial settings. They transgress the accepted intergenerational divisions of labor and norms of conduct” (168). This observation of Habib is clearly visible in the development of Mansur’s character who represents a younger generation, intending to spark the lost faith of older generation into the fight for regaining the lost land. Further, Kanafani uses Dr Qassim’s character to describe Mansur’s fluctuating roles of assuming child and adult standpoints. This status quo of Mansur’s liminal positionality arises from the “...political commitments in conflict [zones], whether it be strategies for survival or more explicit active investments in belligerency. The capacity for children [like Mansur] to do these things in conflict zones is also heavily influenced by age. In conflict zones the stages of childhood shape the changing roles and political competencies that young people have in relation to the conflict around them” (Lee Koo 2015:14).

Being a close observer of Palestinian children, Kanafani has portrayed children in his stories who are adversely affected by the Israel-Palestine conflict. Mansur, who is a literary child of Kanafani brims with enthusiasm to participate in the resistance and notably who has forgone his childhood. His journey to Safad explains the construction of his revolutionary character: “People were moving about without taking much notice of the sound of bullets, which gave the atmosphere a feeling of intolerable tension” (62). The above lines explain how the violence has deeply affected the child in Mansur. With the description of the land of



terror, the parallel development of Mansur as “young-adult” is witnessed in the story. The topography of the region reigned with terror as: “Anonymous shots skimmed the edges of the roofs producing sparks which fell on the stone rooms. There was an odor of silence and death and fear and courage and alarm coming from wives who didn’t know if their husbands were still alive” (66). Kanafani even describes the economic disparity between the Arabs and Jews to conceptualise the situations that have given rise to a Mansur who walks with a gun to protect his country. It is narrated through the conversation of Mansur with Ustaz Ma’aruf, “...“The Jews.” “On the roofs, behind the iron windows, where only divine bullets can penetrate.” “Where are we?” “You’ll see now . . . behind the alleys, in front of every hole big enough for a fly”” (66).

This story, like previous ones, explains the history of the Palestine-Israel struggle and brings out the colonial tendency of the Israeli invasion. Kanafani speaks through his character Ustaz Ma’aruf as:

In Safad, even though there were four thousand Jews who had never, for one day, been farmers, no one minded. They’d lived in their small shops for a long time, selling their wares to the people, exchanging greetings with them and long conversations. They’d be invited to lunch and dinner. Because they’d been there for a long time, they knew how to speak Arabic. They were called by Arabic names and they read Arabic books and newspapers. It seemed logical for the inhabitants of Safad to call them Arab Jews (68).

The above cited passage delineates the harmonious relationship between Arabs and Jews before the creation of Israel and the occupation of the land of Palestine by the Zionist forces. The story even puts forth Britain’s colonial rule over the land and its attitude towards Palestinians. By explaining the blueprint of Safad, Kanafani is showcasing the settlements of Britain and Jewish

powers in the land. The story highlights the violence instigated upon the people of Palestine which is narrated as a story to Mansur. Furthermore, the attack upon Mansur's new friends and Mansur's counterattack with his gun make him participate in the resistance that he dreamt for a very long time. The depiction of Mansur as a resilient child is done as a trope to understand the influence of conflict on children and the undying fight for land that is transferred across generations.

“He Was a Child That Day” is the most picturesque story of Kanafani, which paints an idyllic picture of Palestine. The plot revolves around a group of Palestinian travellers' encounter with the Israeli forces and their deaths following it. Though not the protagonist of the story, the child plays an important role in demonstrating the violence instigated on children. The story that delves into narrating the roads and directions of Palestine changes when a woman shares the incident of a bomb blast in an orphanage in Palestine that has led to the deaths of the children. This story narrates the particular horrendous and violent incident as: “...a story about how the Jews had blown up an orphanage in Jaffa and how the bodies of the children had been strewn about the crater of Iskandar Iwad Street mixed with the seeds of burst oranges. A bomb had been placed in a truck filled with oranges which was stopped at the steps of the orphanage” (137). This story shows the centrality of the plight of Palestinian children during the Israel-Palestine wars.

The tension arises in the story when the Israeli military stops the car and raids for weapons among the Palestinian travellers. The travellers are made to line up on the road and are shot to death by the army, indicating the uncertainty of Palestinian lives. Finally, the death of the child is described by Kanafani as: “Putting his hands in his trouser pockets, and without looking back, he walked with quiet deliberate steps down the middle of the road. He began to count slowly to himself: one, two, three . . .” (139). These last lines of the story vividly bring out the predicament of Palestinian children, who are the main victims of the

war. Kanafani's portrayal of the child running for his life resonates with the unchanging attitude of the Israeli army toward Palestinian children to date, as the on-going war in Gaza has brutally killed more than 4000 innocent Palestinian children (Al-Mughrabi and Al-Mughrabi 2023). A child for his life by counting numbers illustrates the helpless state of children in these circumstances. As Timea Spitka (2023) points out: "The lack of protection, in particular for Palestinian children living under the occupation, has raised many alarms. The current age of responsibility for Palestinian children living under Israeli occupation is 12. However, Palestinian children under 12 have also been taken into custody by Israeli military without their parents' knowledge, and as young as 12 have been jailed without charges, adequate trial or representation" (110). This shows how conditions for Palestinian children under occupation have not changed since Kanafani depicted a child running for his life.

Children have always been at the centre of the Israel and Palestine conflict. Due to this, Palestinian childhood is centred around unending violence and traumatic experience. Kanafani, who is a keen observer of children, reflected on the pain of Palestinian children who are constantly monitored and punished. As Bruner pointed out: "human beings use language and culture to construct meanings to represent and understand the historical reality of the community to which they belong. Military conflicts are not exempt from this need for understanding. In such deeply disturbing circumstances, the use of literary language can be a powerful means of expression that enables us to face the complexities embedded in these conflicts and metaphorically encapsulate our emotions" (Qtd. Francisco Antonio Martínez-Carratalá and Sebastián Miras 2023: 36). The discussed stories show how Kanafani has created the characters of children in his literary language who have lost their childhood due to the unending wars. When one child becomes a mouthpiece for him to narrate the history of Palestine, the other one helps him describe the pain of living in exile as a refugee. In the same vein, when Mansur holds arms to fight in the resistance movement, the other child runs for

his life, knowing his fate. It can be surmised that Kanafani's child characters arise from the spectrum of violence, punishments, wars, and the destruction of homes.



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