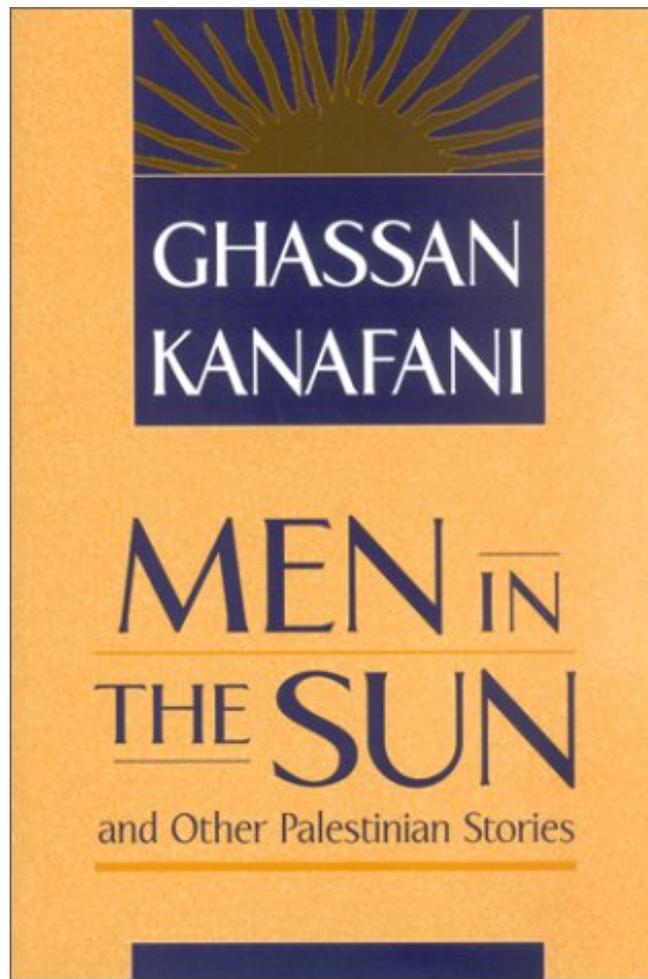


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Note
Ghassan Kanafani's "Men in the Sun"

by Linda Dittmar



MEN IN THE SUN AND OTHER PALESTINIAN STORIES BY GHASSAN KANAFANI (1963)

Inescapably, much of Palestinian literature is about loss of homes and lands and family and dispossession, where the initiating event was the Nakba: the 1948 "catastrophe" of mass exile, when Israel expelled some 750,000 Palestinians from their villages and towns in what was becoming Israel. It's a devastation that continues to this day. The writing that responds to this trauma is a literature of mourning, protest, and resistance, written above all to sustain one's own people and for the world to see.

Among these narratives, Ghassan Kanafani's novella, "Men in the Sun," may be, to date, the harshest. When I teach it in my undergraduate course in Israeli/Palestinian literature, I pair it with Kanafani's other iconic more directly militant novella, "The Return to Haifa." Each makes for powerful reading, helping American students see both the terrible losses incurred through the Nakba and the dignity of resistance.

Ghassan Kanafani was killed by a car bomb in Beirut in 1972, presumably planted by the Israeli Mossad. He was a Marxist Palestinian journalist and activist killed for his presumed behind-the-scenes role in a massacre at Israel's main airport. The novellas, however, are not about militant violence, though of course war is their inescapably grim backdrop. "The Return to Haifa" concerns a Palestinian couple returning (twenty years later) to see their abandoned house, where unexpectedly they encounter their long-lost son, now in Israeli army uniform. The choice is his: to stay with his adoptive Jewish mother, herself a holocaust survivor, or reclaim his Palestinian identity. "Men in the Sun" tells the story of four Palestinian men's illegal journey to Kuwait.

While the following concerns only "Men in the Sun," "The Return to Haifa" is equally crucial, both as a companion piece and on its own.

The template for "Men in the Sun" is familiar: a few migrants, in this case three Palestinian males, are trying to reach Kuwait illegally. They are now in Iraq, where each lands in the office of the sleazy agent, "the fat man," who offers dubious passage at exorbitant prices. Instead, they each accept improvised passage from a fellow Palestinian driving an empty water-tank lorry.

It's not a spoiler to say that these men come to a bad end. It's a familiar story, unbearable yet recurrent. Like other writers, Kanafani individualizes his characters and the histories and traumas each of them carries. The template is global but the particulars are Palestinian, all originating in a Nakba that is barely mentioned. It is the story of global forces but also a story of the specifically Palestinian tragedy called "Nakba." As individuals, these men engage our empathy; as part of a collective they lay claim to our politics.

The cast of representative characters includes the following: Abu Qais, a middle-aged married man; Marwan, a teenager, who needs to support his family once his older brother's remittances stopped; and Assad, a seasoned young man who already knows the lies and challenges that beset this journey. The lorry driver is Abdul Khaizuran, a former Palestinian freedom fighter who got wounded in battle. Each is marked by his own experiences and yearnings, gradually revealed through conversations and

extended introspective flashbacks. This braided structure allows both our empathy and our understanding to unfold gradually, drawing us increasingly into the tragedy that unfolds here.

The story is beautifully told, with special sensitivity to the landscape as well as the characters' inner worlds. The tension of the narrative is, of course, the need to cross the borders. Abdul Khaizuran maneuvers the passage deftly, having the men step briefly into the empty water-tank at the checkpoint and then shortly after leaving it. But things go wrong at the second checkpoint, where he is delayed by joking border guards. Not accidentally, the jokes are about his having been with a "dancer"--that is, jokes about sexual prowess that are hard for him to bear: Abdul Khaizuran was wounded in battle between his legs.

In each case being cut off from the anchor of traditional communal life and self-sufficiency means damage to the sense of self, on top of the literal privation, that drove them to attempt this dangerous migration.

While this wound is literal, all four men are struggling with vulnerable empowerment. It's a notion of manhood where virility means self-sufficiency, dignity, and self-respect. In each case being cut off from the anchor of traditional communal life and self-sufficiency means damage to the sense of self, on top of the literal privation, that drove them to attempt this dangerous migration. Different in age and life experience, they are united in this damage and in death. At the end they are just bodies Abdul Khaizuran needs to dispose of.

Still, while the narration is powerful and even lyrical, the crux of "Men in the Sun" is in its ending, when Abdul Khaizuran discovers his passengers' dead bodies. Kanafani doesn't spare us Abdul Khaizuran's anguish. A decent man, we see him distraught by his passengers' deaths. But he also has to dispose of them, and ultimately it is not a funeral but a rubbish heap that receives the three men we've come to know and care about. Here, too, the description is merciless, closely evoked down to minor details. Moreover, before leaving, Abdul Khaizuran turns back to the bodies once more, taking whatever money they have, including Marwan's treasured watch.

"Men in the Sun" ends as Abdul Khaizuran, feeling that his head would explode, cries out into the night:

"Why didn't you knock on the sides of the truck? Why didn't you say anything? Why?"

The desert suddenly began to send back the echo:

Why didn't you knock on the sides of the truck? Why didn't you bang on the sides of the truck? Why? Why? Why?

Like many other refugee stories, "Men in the Sun" speaks to us even if we don't know much about the Palestinians. The story--evocative and beautifully written--is not unlike others

from Syria or the Congo, Guatemala or El Salvador, even if the particulars are different. The concluding question of "Why?" resonates not only regarding the men not sounding the alarm but about what set them on this desperate journey to begin with. In this "Why?" the particular and the collective mingle: the Palestinian story and the larger story of displaced people in desperate search for work and refuge.



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