

Ghassan Kanafani: Introduktion

Innehåll

Till första studiecirkelträffen läser vi följande två texter, en teoretisk och en skönlitterär:

Thoughts on Change and the “Blind Language” (1972)
ur *Ghassan Kanafani: Selected Political Writings* (2024)

Novell: The Cake Vendor (1959)
ur *All That's Left to You: A Novella and Short Stories* (2004)

Den som har tid och lust att fördjupa sig lite mer kan också med fördel läsa redaktörerna Louis Brehony och Tahrir Hamdis förord till boken *Selected Political Writings*:

The Revolutionary Journey of Ghassan Kanafani (2024)
ur *Ghassan Kanafani: Selected Political Writings* (2024)

Alla tre texterna ingår i detta dokument.

On Childhood, Literature, Marxism, the Front and Al-Hadaf (1972)

Palestinian Affairs obtained the full text of an unpublished private conversation conducted by a Swiss writer, who was a specialist in Ghassan Kanafani's literature. Conducted just a few weeks before the assassination of the Palestinian resistance martyr, this interview eventually formed part of the writer's scholarly study on Ghassan Kanafani's literary work.

Ghassan, can you tell me something about your personal experience?

I think my story reflects a very traditional Palestinian background. I left Palestine when I was eleven years old and I came from a middle-class family. My father was a lawyer and I was studying in a French missionary school. Suddenly, this middle-class family collapsed and we became refugees, and my father immediately stopped working because of his deep class roots. Continuing to work after we left Palestine no longer made sense to him. This would have forced him to abandon his social class and move to a lower class. This is not easy. As for us, we started working as children and teenagers to support the family. I was able to continue my education on my own through my job as a teacher in one of the primary schools in the village, which does not require high academic qualifications. It was a logical start, as it helped me continue studying and finish secondary school in the meantime. After that, I enrolled at university [Damascus University], in the Department of Arabic Literature, for three years, after which I was dismissed for political reasons. Then, I went to Kuwait, where I stayed for six years. There I started reading and writing.

My political career began in 1952, when I was fourteen or fifteen years old. In that same year, or in 1953, I met Dr. George Habash by chance in Damascus, for the first time. I was working as a proof reader in a printing house. I don't remember who introduced me to Al-Hakim, but my relationship with him began at that time. I immediately joined the ranks of the Arab Nationalist Movement and thus began my political life. During my stay in Kuwait, I was politically active within the Arab Nationalist Movement, which is now represented by a significant minority in the Kuwaiti government. In 1960 I was asked to move to Lebanon to work on the party's newspaper. In 1967 I was asked to work with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which is the Palestinian branch of the Arab Nationalist Movement. In 1969 I started my work on the newspaper "Al-Hadaf", where I continue to work.

Did you start writing as a result of your studies in Arabic literature?

No, I think my interest in Arabic literature started before my studies. I suspect that this interest of mine was the result of a complex, if memory serves me correctly. Before we left Palestine, I was studying in a French missionary school, as I mentioned before. Therefore, I did not possess the Arabic language as an Arab. This caused me a lot of problems. My friends always made fun of me because I was not good at Arabic. This perception was not

clear when we were in Palestine because of my social class. But when we left Palestine, my friends were of a different social class and immediately noticed that my Arabic was poor and that I resorted to foreign expressions in my conversations, and so I concentrated on the Arabic language to handle my problem. This was probably in 1954. I think I broke my leg that year in an accident. I had to stay in bed for six months. It was then that I started reading Arabic in earnest.

I think we can cite many examples throughout history of people who have “lost” their language and are therefore trying to recover it. Do you think that this process develops a person politically?

I don't know. That may be so. As for me personally, I was politicised in a different way. I got involved in politics at an early stage because we lived in the camp. And so, I was in direct contact with the Palestinians and their problems through that sad and emotional atmosphere that I experienced as a child. It was not difficult for me to discover the political roots of the environment I lived in.

When I started teaching, I faced great difficulties with the children I taught in the camp. I always got angry when I saw a child sleeping in class. Then I simply found out why: these kids were working at night, selling sweets or chewing gum or something like that in the cinemas and on the streets. Naturally, they would come to class very tired. Such a situation immediately brings the person to the root of the problem. It became clear to me that the child's drowsiness was not the result of his disdain for me or his hatred of education, just as it had nothing to do with my dignity as a teacher, but was merely a reflection of a political problem.

So your teaching experience contributed to the development of your social and political awareness.

Yes, and I remember it happened one day directly. As you know, primary school teachers teach all subjects, including drawing, arithmetic, English, Arabic and other subjects. One day, I was trying to teach the children to draw an apple and a banana according to the syllabus approved by the Syrian government, as I was teaching there and so I had to stick to the book. And at that moment, when I was trying to draw these two pictures on the blackboard as best as I could, I felt a sense of alienation, of not belonging; and I remember well that I felt at that moment that I had to do something, because I realised, before even looking at the faces of the children sitting behind me, that they had never seen an apple or a banana. So these things were the last thing that interested them. There was no connection between them and these two pictures. In fact, the relationship between their feelings and these drawings was strained, not good. It was a decisive turning point, as I remember that very moment clearly among all the events of my life. As a result, I erased the drawings from the board and asked the children to draw the camp. A few days later, when the inspector came to the school, he said that I had deviated from the government-determined programme, which would prove that I was a failed teacher. Having to defend

myself led me straight to the Palestinian cause. Accumulating small steps like these pushes people to make decisions that will mark their whole life.

Commenting on this point, I think when you engage in art, as a socialist anyway, you connect art directly to the social, political and economic spheres. You touched on this by drawing an apple and a banana. But as for your writings, are these works related to your reality and the present situation, or are they derived from [literary] heritage?

My first short story was published in 1956 and was called "A New Sun". It revolves around a boy in Gaza. When I review all the stories I have written about Palestine so far, it is clear to me that each story is directly or indirectly linked, with a thin or solid thread, to my personal experiences in life. However, my style of writing fully developed during the period between 1956 and 1960 or, more specifically, in 1962. At first, I wrote about Palestine as a problem in its own right; as well as about Palestinian children, about the Palestinian as a human being, about Palestinian hopes, being themselves separate things from our independent and autonomous world; as inevitable Palestinian facts. Then it became clear to me that I saw in Palestine an integrated human symbol. When I write about a Palestinian family, I am actually writing about a human experience. There is no incident in the world that is not represented in the Palestinian tragedy. When I portray the misery of the Palestinians, I am in fact seeing the Palestinians as a symbol of misery all over the world. And you can say that Palestine represents the whole world in my stories. The [literary] critic can now notice that my stories are not only about the Palestinian [individual] and his problems, but also about the human condition of a man suffering from those problems. But perhaps those problems are more crystallised in the lives of Palestinians.

Did your literary development accompany your political development?

Yes. In fact, I don't know which preceded the other. The day before yesterday, I was watching one of my stories that was produced as a film. I had written this story in 1961. I saw the film with a new perspective, as I suddenly discovered that the dialogue between the protagonists, their line of thinking, their [social] class, their aspirations and their roots at that time expressed advanced concepts of my political thinking. [So] I can say that my personality as a novelist was more developed than my personality as a political actor, not the other way around, and that is reflected in my analysis and understanding of society.

Does your writing reflect an analysis of your society, or do you also colour your analyses in an emotional way?

I suppose my stories were based on an emotional situation at the beginning. But you can say that my writing started to reflect reality from the early sixties. My observation of this reality and my writing about it led me to a proper analysis. My stories themselves lack analysis. However, they narrate the way the protagonists of the story act, the decisions they make, the reasons that motivate them to make those decisions, the possibility of

crystallising those decisions, etc. In my novels I express reality, as I understand it, without analysis. As for what I meant by saying that my stories were more developed [than my political views], it was due to my sincere amazement when I followed the development of the characters in the story I was watching as a film, and which I had not read for the last few years. I was astonished when I listened [again] to the dialogue of my characters about their problems and was able to compare their dialogue with the political articles I had written in the same period of time and saw that the protagonists of the story were analysing things in a deeper and more correct way than my political articles.

You mentioned that you started your political work by joining the Arab Nationalist Movement the day you met Habash in 1953. When did you embrace socialist principles [then]? The Arab Nationalist Movement was not a socialist movement at the beginning.

No, it wasn't. The Arab Nationalist Movement was [directed] against colonialism, imperialism and reactionary movements. It did not have an ideological line at that time. However, this movement adopted a socialist line of its own during the years it existed. Anti-imperialism gives impetus to socialism if it does not stop fighting in the middle of the battle and if it does not come to an agreement with imperialism. If this is the case, that movement will not be able to become a socialist movement. But if one continues to struggle [it is natural] that the [anti-imperialist] movement will develop into a socialist position. The Arab nationalists realised this fact in the late 1950s. They realised that they could not win the war against imperialism unless they relied on certain [social] classes: those classes who fight against imperialism not only for their dignity, but for their livelihood. And it was this [road] that would lead directly to socialism.

But in our society and our movement [the Arab Nationalist Movement] we were very sensitive to Marxist-Leninist [principles], and this position was not the result of our hostility to socialism, but the result of the mistakes made by the communist parties in the Arab world. That is why it was very difficult for the Arab Nationalist Movement to adopt Marxism-Leninism before 1964. But in 1967, specifically in July, the Popular Front embraced the [principles] of Marxism-Leninism and was thus the only [front] within the Arab Nationalist Movement to take such a step. The Arab Nationalist Movement changed its name to the Socialist Labour Party. As for the Palestinian branch of it, it was called the "Popular Front". Of course, this is a simplification of the problem. We had developed within the Arab nationalist movement. There was a constant struggle within the movement between the so-called right and the left. In each round, the left was the winner because our position on anti-imperialism and reactionary attitudes was better [than the position of the right]. This resulted in the adoption of Marxism-Leninism.

As for me, I don't remember now whether my position on the conflicts that arose within the front was leaning to the right or to the left, because the border between right and left was not separated then as it is now, as occurs for example in the developed political parties. But I can say that the Arab Nationalist Movement included some young elements, including myself, who made fun of the old people's sensitivity to communism. Of course,

we were not communists at that time and we were not in favour of communism. However, our sensitivity towards communism was less than that of the elders. Consequently, the new generation played a leading role in the development of the Arab Nationalist Movement into a Marxist-Leninist movement. The main factor in this was the fact that the majority of the members of the Arab nationalist movement belonged to the poor class. As for the members belonging to the petty bourgeoisie or the big bourgeoisie, their number was limited. They did not continue with this movement either, they left it within two years of joining. New members [of these classes] also joined, who then left it in their turn [shortly afterwards]. As for the poor classes, they continued, and soon formed a pressing force within the Arab Nationalist Movement.

When did you start studying Marxism-Leninism? Do you remember?

I don't think my own experience in this regard is traditional. First, I was and still am an admirer of Soviet writers. However, my admiration for them was absolute at the time, which helped me to break the ice between me and Marxism. This way, I was exposed to Marxism at an early stage through my readings and admiration for Soviet writers. Secondly, my sister's husband was a prominent communist leader. My sister married in 1952 and her husband influenced my life at that early stage. Also, when I went to Kuwait, I stayed with another six young people in a house and, a few weeks after my arrival, I found out that they were forming a communist cell. So I started reading about Marxism at a very early stage. I don't know how much I absorbed at that time and at that stage, being under the influence of those emotions with the Arab Nationalist Movement. I can't measure my understanding or comprehension of the material I was reading. However, the content was not alien to me.

It may have been these early influences that moved your [early] stories forward [in relation to your political ideas at the time]. I think your readings of Soviet literature and your contacts with Marxists were reflected in your writing.

I don't think these factors take precedence. I think the 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. Perhaps my fondness for Soviet literature was due to the fact that it expresses, analyses, deals with and describes what I was actually seeing. My admiration continues, of course. However, I don't know whether Soviet literature had an influence on my writing. I don't know the size of this effect. 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. As for the artistic characters in my first stories, they were always evil. And that's because of [my experience with] my subordinates at work. So life itself had the biggest influence [on my writing].

You belonged to the middle class, but joined the proletariat as a child.

Yes, of course, my background is related to the middle class because my father belonged to the middle class before we went to Syria as refugees. And my family's attachment to its [class] roots was far from reality, which had no connection to those roots. And we kids had to pay the price for this contradiction [between the past and reality]. Therefore, my relationship [with members of my class] became aggressive instead of friendly. I won't pretend to have joined the proletariat. I was not a real proletarian, but I joined what we call in our language the "lumpen proletariat", whose members are not part of the productive apparatus, they [live] on the margins of the proletariat. But then it helped me, of course, to understand the ideology of the proletariat, but I can't say that I was part of the proletariat at that time.

However, from the beginning you were able to see reality from the perspective of the oppressed.

Yes, you can say that. My concept, however, was not crystallised in a scientific, analytical way, but was [simply an expression of] an emotional state.

Let's go back now to 1967, when the "Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine" was born. What were the beliefs of this organisation and what were the reasons for creating a new organisation?

As you know, the Popular Front was not a new organisation. It is essentially the Palestinian branch of the Arab Nationalist Movement of which I was a member. It developed at first through members of the movement in 1967. We created the "Popular Front" because the Arab world [took] centre stage [in the political space]. The size of the Palestinian branch of the Arab Nationalist Movement has also expanded a lot and there have been changes in its leadership and in the mentality of its members. So we joined the Popular Front. Of course, I personally joined the Front because I believe that the Front as a party represents a relatively advanced stage of the other [political] organisations in the field of Palestinian work. I believe that I can realise my future visions through this organisation. This is the main reason why I joined the Popular Front.

How do you see your role as editor-in-chief of the newspaper "Al-Hadaf" in this organisation, and can you tell me something about its method of mass mobilisation?

I am a member of this organisation, which in fact constitutes a party that has its own internal system and political strategy. It also has an organisational and leadership strategy based on core democratic principles. Therefore, when the leadership assigns me this particular position, I have to complete a specific programme. I am a member of the Central Information Committee of the Popular Front. *Al Hadaf* is part of the media structure of the Front, according to our understanding of the media, which is not limited to propaganda, but goes beyond education, etc. I am not responsible for *Al Hadaf*. The task is entrusted to

the Central Media Committee, and I represent this committee in the newspaper. In practical terms, I have to deal with the organisational aspect of this institution (*Al Hadaaf*), but we have a committee that reads and evaluates the *Al Hadaaf*, writes articles and discusses editorials. Within the Front, there are ten similar institutions and departments. Our institution may be smaller than the rest. However, there are circles within the Popular Front that practice social and political activities inside the camps. We also have those who work in the military struggle and other camps. Each of us is an integral part of the other. Of course, those who work in the organisational field, i.e. in organising conferences, educational programme, meetings and contacts with the masses, benefit from our newspaper to express the point of view of the Popular Front. They also consult us regarding the masses. Therefore, as a result of these dynamic relations between them, all circles carry out a mass mobilisation campaign together.

Can you tell me something about the newspaper itself?

Working [on the paper] is very stressful. That's how I feel now that I've finished this week's issue. I feel exhausted and it's horrible for someone to work for a paper like this. By the time you finish the last sentence of another issue, you're suddenly faced with twenty blank pages to fill. Also, every line, title and picture in the paper is discussed by the [members] at the Front, and the slightest mistake is monitored. The newspaper is then subject to criticism and working on it is not like working on an ordinary newspaper. In the ordinary newspaper you just have to do your work, but in our newspaper the smallest details are discussed by the [different circles within the Front] who read them carefully. So it is very difficult for a person to do an integrated work in front of this big court, which is made up of [other] members of the Front. So, the person feels that he has to work harder.

Also, now we live in a developing country. In the resistance movement, and in an organisation like ours, every department tries to attract "people" with talents and competencies, however minor they may be, to fulfil the work involved, since the completion of the work and the implementation of the programmes assigned to one are essential things for the individual. We, at *Al Hadaaf* have a small number of employees, and when we ask the Front to assign us more workers, the answer we hear is: "Give us two or three of your employees to teach the grassroots, because working at the grassroots is more important than working at the newspaper." So we remain silent, lest they take employees away from us. It is hard for others to believe that only three people edit *Al Hadaaf*. This situation has existed for three years. Sometimes we get [extra] help from a fourth person, but then this person leaves us, and we get another one, and the story repeats itself.

Then you have to work day and night.

Yes. I don't think any of the colleagues work less than 13-14 hours a day. And that's non-stop, without holidays and without mercy from criticism. People in our organisation, in the government and in other newspapers have criticised us.

Do you consider Al-Hadaf to be a progressive newspaper, and do you think it reads like a progressive newspaper from a theoretical political angle?

Yes, and I also think that causes a problem. I'm not trying to praise the paper, but it is very difficult to express deep political and theoretical ideas in a simple way. Few people have this ability. In the Popular Front we have two people who can express deep thoughts in an easy way that anyone who reads them can understand. One of them is George Habash. The other is one of the military leaders who wrote wonderful pieces. As for the rest, it is difficult, especially if they have not practised before. We always face criticism from the grassroots that it is very difficult to understand what our newspaper writes, and that we have to simplify things and write in an easy way.

That is why preparing the paper takes a lot of time, as I have to revise the paper and simplify some of the points it raises after writing it. I think that the creation of other internal newspapers on the Front would facilitate our task and the continuation of our work in this line. The internal newspaper can express easy things and simple ideas. As for a central public newspaper like ours, it is difficult for us to imitate the internal newspapers because we have to take a serious line. To do so, we are trying [now] to limit the amount of articles that deal with complex political ideas, so that these articles take up a small amount of pages and focus on direct political campaigns.

Do you publish literary works, like poetry and other works, in your newspaper?

We dedicate two pages to literature, film criticism, theatre, art, painting and more. I think the journalists mentioned earlier are the most popular ones because many of the members of the Front understand the left wing line of thought through these pages.

Have you personally published short stories?

I haven't had time to write since I started working at *Al-Hadaf*. In fact, I only [recently] published two stories about an old woman I always write about [Umm Saad]. I don't have time for literary writing and this is very annoying.

Would you like to write more?

Usually when I get out of work at the office and go home I feel so tired that I can't write. So I read instead. And, of course, I have to read for two hours a day because I can't go on without it. But after I finish reading I feel better going to sleep or watching a silly movie [for me], because I can't write [after finishing my work].

Do you think that recent developments within the Front are reflected in the fact that it has become a collective where debates abound, rather than a collective that engages in military activities?

No, I don't agree with you. In fact, in the Front we have always insisted on a certain strategic line whose motto is that every politician is also a fighter and every fighter is a politician. As for the phenomenon you are witnessing now, it is not limited to us [at the Front]. This phenomenon is due to the fact that the Palestinian resistance movement is now in a state of decline due to objective circumstances that are trying to destroy us in this period of time. We have been living in this state of decline since September 1970, which prevents us from increasing our military activities. But that does not mean that we are going to stop military action. This is for the resistance movement in general. As for the Popular Front in particular, our military operations in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel itself have intensified over the last two years. But Israel is trying to hide these operations. But we remain active. We also have bases in southern Lebanon and we are preparing for a secret people's war against the reactionaries in Jordan. However, the state of decay in which we live and the general repressive atmosphere imposed by the Arab governments affects public opinion, and people think that we have stopped military activities. But this conclusion is incorrect.

How did the state of decay, in your opinion, affect the Palestinian individual without referring to a specific political line?

Political movements are like human beings. When a person is healthy, famous and rich, friends gather around him and everyone supports him. But when he gets old, sick and loses his money, the friends around him disperse. Now we are [as a resistance movement] going through this stage, the stage of apathy, so to speak. The Palestinian individual feels that the dreams he built up over the last few years have been undermined. This is a painful feeling, you know, and I think many comrades share my opinion: that this stage is temporary. When the Palestinian individual discovers that we are fighting a great enemy that we cannot defeat in a few years, that our war is long term and that we will be defeated repeatedly, then the loyalty of the Palestinian individual to the Palestinian revolution will not be as fragile and emotional as it is now. I believe that we can mobilise the crowd again when we win our first new victory. I am confident that this victory will come. We are not afraid of this 'down time', as I like to call it. This is normal since Arab leaders and Arab media spokesmen made many promises to the masses, praising an easily achievable victory. Now, many Arabs have discovered that these promises were misleading. Therefore, I do not believe that this phenomenon [i.e. the apathy of the Palestinian individual] is an inherent and continuous phenomenon. We know that we will overcome this stage in the future and that the loyalty of the masses to the revolution will be stronger than before.

Were you or the Front leadership too optimistic in 1967, 1968 or 1969? Did you make too many promises? Did you see this conflict as an easy struggle?

No. In fact the Popular Front was warning the masses through its written documents that the problem was not easy. It also warned them that they would be defeated repeatedly and would face bloodbaths and many tragedies, and massacres. We mentioned it many times, but in general, the leadership of the Palestinian revolution promised before the masses an

easy victory. As for optimism, we are very optimistic, and I can say that our situation now, despite being at the lowest point of our difficult struggle, is better than in 1967, 1968 or 1969 – from a scientific point of view and as a resistance movement, through which it evaluates its historical movement, and not through its superficial appearances.

Novell: The Cake Vendor (1959)

Was it simply a coincidence that I should meet him again, in the same place where I first encountered him?

He was squatting there as if he'd never once shifted his position, with his rough black hair, his eyes lit up with a dull gleam of hopelessness, hunched over his wooden box, and staring at the shine of an expensive pair of shoes. For an entire year his image had remained constant with me, indelibly engraved on my mind, ever since I'd first seen him in that particular corner. And for no apparent reason, other than that I myself had occupied this same spot ten years earlier, when I was passing a most difficult period of my life. My way of polishing shoes had been similar to his; my vision of the whole universe was a shoe—its toe and heel represented two cold poles between which my entire world was contained.

When I'd first seen him, a year earlier, his mouth had spat out a mechanical offer without even looking at my shoes. "I can make them shine like a mirror, sir," he'd hurriedly affirmed.

Motivated by the desire to find compensation for the long months of suffering, I placed a foot squarely on the hump of the box, and looked at the broad line of sweat rimming his dirty blue shirt. His small, thin shoulder muscles began to expand and contract, while his head nodded rhythmically.

"These are cheap shoes," he'd commented.

I didn't feel insulted, for my feelings on seeing a cheap pair of shoes had been similar to his, except that I'd refrained from expressing myself so naively. Cheap shoes gave me the feeling of being close to the world, but I had no intention of discoursing on that topic.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Eleven."

"Palestinian?" I questioned.

His answer came by way of a wordless nod, and I sensed in that gesture an element of concealed shame.

"Where do you live?" I enquired.

"In the refugee camp," he responded.

"With your father?" I ventured.

"No, with my mother," he said.

“You go to school, don’t you?” I continued.

“Yes,” was his terse reply.

He flicked his thumb against the sole, looked up at me with two limpid eyes, and stretched out his small palm in my direction. I experienced a moment of anguish, and the realization of two conflicting emotions struggling for ascendancy within me. Should I give him his normal rate, or should I offer more? When I received my minimum fee, I’d feel pride at the dignity of my work, and when I was tipped, a sense of humiliation would overshadow my happiness at the extra money I earned. I could feel his eyes burning my back as I turned the corner, after having paid him no more than his due. When I looked round, he’d averted his eyes, and was once more staring at the pavement in the hope of detaining another passerby.

However, my association with Hamid didn’t end here, for less than a month later I was appointed to the position of teacher in one of the refugee schools, and on entering the classroom for the first time I found him sitting in the front row. His rough black hair was shorter than before, his threadbare shirt was inadequate to cover his nakedness, and his eyes still bore traces of an ineradicable sadness.

I was pleased when he didn’t acknowledge me, and though it seemed natural that a shoe-shine boy should forget his casual customers, I was still obsessed with the fear that he’d recognize me. Had he done so, then my presence in the class would have been constantly overshadowed by a feeling of embarrassment. Throughout my first lesson I tried unsuccessfully to distract myself from his face, which combined an expression of attentiveness with visible anxiety. The class itself was made up of others like Hamid, children waiting impatiently for the final bell to sound, when they’d take off through the alleys of Damascus, racing against dusk to earn their supper. They awaited the hour of their liberty with impatience, fanning out under the cold, grey sky, each of them pursuing their own course in life, and as night fell, they would return to their tents or mud huts where a family remained crammed together, silent the whole night through, except for the sound of suppressed coughing.

I used to feel that I was teaching children who were old for their years. The spark in each of them seemed to have been ignited by the harsh friction of contact with a rough edged life. In class, the movement of their eyes seemed like the reflection of small windows looking out from mysterious, dark planets. They kept their lips firmly closed, as though they feared to let loose the string of curses that would otherwise issue from them. The class was a miniature world, a microcosm full of misery of a heroic kind. I felt alien to their shared characteristics, a feeling that made me only the more determined to get to their feelings and thoughts.

Hamid was of average intelligence, but he showed no inclination to study, and my efforts to encourage him were to no avail.

“Hamid,” I’d say, “don’t pretend to me that you study at home, because I know you never do.”

“No, sir.”

“Why don’t you study?” I continued.

“Because I work,” was his reply.

“Till what hour?” I asked.

He looked up with big, sad eyes, while his small fingers nervously twirled a dirty cap, and whispered in a despondent voice: “Until midnight...sir... The people leaving the cinema always buy my cakes if I wait outside for them.”

“Cakes? So you sell cakes?” I said, somewhat incredulously.

“Yes, sir... cakes,” he answered bashfully.

“I thought you... Never mind, go back to your seat.”

Throughout the night I was plagued by the recurrent image of that poor little boy wandering barefoot through the streets of Damascus, and waiting for the cinema audiences to decamp into the street. It was a rainy October night. I imagined him standing on a comer trembling like a leaf in a storm, his shoulders hunched, his hands pressed into the rents in his clothes. He’d be staring at the tray of cakes in front of him, anticipating a hungry customer who’d buy a cake from him, or perhaps two customers...or three...his lips framing a hopeless smile, before he resumed staring at the swirling October gutters.

The following day I saw him in class. His eyes were heavy with sleep, and periodically his head would abruptly nod on to his chest, only to be wearily retrieved.

“Do you want to sleep, Hamid?” I asked.

“No, sir,” was his reply.

“If you want to sleep, I can take you to the teacher’s room.”

“No, sir.”

Nevertheless, as he appeared especially fatigued, I led him off to the privacy of the teacher’s room. It was bare except for a single picture executed by the unsuccessful drawing master with the remnants of the students’ paint. Heavy chairs were scattered along the damp walls and round a table piled high with books and students’ papers. Hamid

stood uncertainly in the doorway. He was clearly anxious, and he twirled his cap with his fingers. He looked alternately at me and then at the room.

“Sleep on any chair you like,” I said.

“We’ll put some firewood in the stove.”

He moved towards the nearest chair and half sat on it, his eyes shining with the gratification of being warm.

“Did you sell any cakes yesterday?” I enquired.

“Not many,” he replied dejectedly, and I noticed that his face trembled.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I slept,” was the reply. “I fell asleep while I was waiting for the film to end, and when I woke, everything was already over.”

“Sleep now,” I said. “I’ll go back to the class.”

I don’t know how I completed the lesson. The emotions welling up in me were such that I felt I might burst into tears in front of the students.

During the break, I found Hamid fast asleep. His nose was still blue from cold, but color was coming back to his cheeks. None of the staff asked questions, as incidents like these were commonplace, and everyone was only too happy to sip his tea in silence.

In the course of the next few days I tried to think of a way to enter Hamid’s life without arousing his curiosity. This was no easy accomplishment as every student in the refugee school insisted on preserving his own sense of individuality, holding on to it as a lifeline, as if there was an unspoken agreement that this was both necessary and a duty. When they occur at the right time, small incidents take on a significance beyond their actual size: that is to say, every major event is possessed of a small beginning. One day my younger brother came to school bringing me my lunch. When I was informed of that, by one of the school servants, I sent Hamid to collect it. When he returned I sensed that he’d been insulted in one way or another. As a consequence I asked him to come to the teacher’s room during the lunch break.

Despite the fact that I was alone, he entered the room with his customary sense of anxiety. His fingers worked agitatedly at his cap, and his eyes gleamed with characteristic ferocity.

“Hamid,” I said, “did you like my brother?”

“He’s like mine,” he said.

I hadn't imagined that the subject would be broached so quickly, and so it was that I asked him in surprise: "Your brother? I thought you only had sisters."

"Yes," he said, "but my brother died."

"Died?"

I felt an increasing sense of frustration at this youngster's trait of secrecy.

"Was he younger than you then?" I asked.

"No, older."

"How did he die?" I questioned.

Hamid didn't answer. I saw him fight to hold back tears that overcame him in the end; trickling rivulets that he furtively tried to conceal.

"Don't speak..." I told him. "If it's any consolation, you may like to know that I too had a brother who died."

"Really?"

"Yes...a big car ran him over," I added.

I was lying, but I wanted to sympathize with the boy's sorrow in some way. I felt that my lie had gone straight to his heart, for his eyes were suddenly expressive of a new sorrow, and he continued talking slowly: "My brother wasn't run over by a car. He was working as a servant on the fourth floor of a building at the time, and he was quite happy."

Hamid was using his arms to clarify his meaning and was unconscious of the tears streaming down his face.

"He put his head out of the lift while it was coming down, and his head was cut off."

"He died?"

It was a stupid question, but an involuntary one, aimed at allaying the sudden fear that gripped my body. Hamid nodded his head and asked: "Did the car cut off your brother's head?"

"My brother? Oh! yes...yes it did!"

"Did you mourn over him a lot?" Hamid continued.

"Yes."

“Do you cry when you remember him?”

“Not much,” I admitted.

“Tell me, sir,” he questioned, “do you have a father?”

“Of course. I mean, yes, why?”

He took one step forward and asked me with tremulous eagerness: “Is he well?”

“Yes.” I said. “Why?”

After that, Hamid seemed to withdraw. His eyes receded into their sockets, and I could sense a tentacular pressure squeezing his lungs. He tightened his lips, and I knew that any attempt to question him would be futile. He stared blankly at the bare wall. His pants were short and torn, and his blue shirt was dirty and frayed. He collected himself and blushed when he realized that I’d been watching him in his state of confusion. He twirled his woolen cap even faster between his fingers.

After that, the problem of Hamid began to infiltrate my life. I found it hard to be the detached observer of his tragic life, and from all of the shared poverty of the class, it was Hamid’s sad predicament and the desperation in his eyes that attracted me. I thought of him constantly. I contemplated going beyond the bounds of duty, and investigating his life systematically. It even occurred to me that I might be able, indirectly, to help him financially, but in a way that would involve no sense of humiliation on his part. But I’d have to proceed with caution or else meet with failure, for in his eyes I discerned not only sorrow but also a great deal of pride and dignity.

However, a series of small incidents led to a diminution of my involvement with Hamid’s case. Indeed, I bore a strange grudge against this hungry, complicated young creature whose many secrets led to his problems remaining permanently unresolved. It happened that one day he complained to me of a teacher colleague who’d grievously insulted him. Staring at me, and scowling surlily, Hamid said: “If I wasn’t an orphan I’d have called my father.”

“Eh...your father’s dead?” I asked sharply.

He shyly lowered his head and said:

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” I questioned.

Instead of answering, he nodded his head continuously and remained silent.

“Then it’s left to you to support your family?” I enquired.

“Yes,” he replied, “it’s up to me. My mother earns a little cleaning the stores of the relief agency, but I earn more.”

He lapsed into silence again, then, spreading out his small hands expressively, he said with vehemence: “I buy three cakes for ten cents and sell each one for five.”

“Do you still fall asleep while you’re waiting for the crowds to come out of the cinema?” I asked.

“No,” he replied, “I’m used to late nights now.”

If the truth were known, I suppose every teacher would have to confess to having cheated in order to assist an unfortunate student to succeed. I myself used to do it. Despite his being of ordinary intelligence, Hamid’s marks were always good, and I never felt the fairness of my marking system to be clearer than in Hamid’s case. But it wasn’t at this stage that the issue became complicated. It grew to be so only when I started to have doubts about Hamid’s behavior, and the things he told me, and the authenticity of his tears.

The whole thing dated from a scorchingly hot day at the end of the school year. The students relayed to me that one of the school servants had severely beaten Hamid as he tried to break out of the school compound. When I summoned the servant to the teacher’s room with the intention of reprimanding him, I found myself facing a man convinced of the right course of his action, someone who expressed only contempt for the exemplary educational concepts that I endeavored to expound to him. By this time, I considered the only method of reasoning with the man was to face him with his own logic.

“Isn’t it wrong, Abu Salim,” I said, “to beat an orphan?”

The man crossed his arms, thrust his head forward, and bellowed: “Orphan? His father’s a blockhead! His shoulders are as big as the world!”

“You mean to say Hamid has a father?” I asked.

Without any variation in tone, the same answer was arrogantly repeated. “His father’s a blockhead!”

The insult stung me. It hurt me that the boy should have gained my compassion on the grounds of his lies. I choked on my own gullibility, and all the concessions I’d allowed him in marks now turned round to accuse me of the error of my ways.

All the way home, Abu Salim’s words kept resounding inside my head, over and over again. I told myself that these confounded boys were in reality much older than their years, and that my mistake lay in treating them as if they were simply children. I’d ignored the fact of

their being so much in advance of their years, and capable of attaining their goal by any means that occurred to them—and that Hamid’s duplicity was consonant with the trickery that a cake vendor uses on a half-drunk customer, selling him one cake for the price of two.

No matter how much I tried to convince myself to the contrary, I couldn’t shake off an acute feeling of having been grossly insulted by Hamid, and my thoughts inclined towards revenge. In retrospect I can now view the issue as trivial, and my thinking even more so, but at the time I was obsessed by the desire to avenge myself for the insult.

What happened subsequently did nothing to abate my rage; on the contrary, it served only to whip up the already tempestuous flames. The situation was worsened when a talkative student related to me how Hamid’s mother had died a few months before, after giving birth to a dead baby girl. I found myself plunged into the web of lies Hamid had spun around me with consummate skill.

My patience finally came to an end one hot afternoon. I was on my way back from school when I suddenly saw him after a long absence. It seemed uncanny that I should meet him in the same place where I’d first seen him.

He was squatting behind his paint-stained wooden box, staring up at the street, hoping to detain a pair of shoes, while I stood there looking on, dumbfounded, almost unable to believe that I was staring at the alleged cake vendor. I felt the insult return to affront me. When I regained consciousness of what I was doing, I found myself grasping him by the collar, and shaking him relentlessly, while all the time I was shouting: “You liar!”

He looked up at me with dilated eyes that showed sudden hints of fear. His lips moved without articulating a word, while his small effort to get free of my grip failed.

I went on repeating my indictment, although I could feel something capitulating inside, in the face of the despairing silence.

“You liar!” I reiterated.

“Sir?”

He said it slowly, raised a finger mechanically, looked around him fearfully, then confessed in a tremulous voice: “Yes sir, I’m a liar, but listen...”

“I don’t want to hear a thing,” I said sharply.

He screwed his eyes up and I imagined that he was about to cry.

His voice was still shaking when he said: “Listen, sir.”

“You liar,” I cut him short. “You live with your mother, isn’t that so?”

“No, sir, no! My mother’s dead, but it’s difficult to explain... When she died, my father asked us to keep her death a secret.”

I relaxed my grip, and asked him in a quieter tone: “Why?”

“Because he didn’t have the money to pay for the funeral, and he was afraid of the government.”

I let my arms fall to my side, sympathizing with the boy’s irrational fear, which persisted to this day, but I was still apprehensive that I was being further deceived. I shouted at him again, only this time more gently: “And your father? You told me he was dead...isn’t that so?”

Hamid could no longer contain himself. He turned his head to the wall and began crying. I heard his voice, strangled by tears: “My father’s not dead, he’s mad. He wanders the streets of the city half-naked. He went mad after he saw my brother’s head chopped off by the lift.”

“Mad?”

“Yes, my brother put his head out of the lift to greet my father, and my father saw the whole thing with his own eyes. It was after that he took to roaming the streets.”

My head was beginning to spin.

“Why did you tell me that you sell cakes?” I said. “Are you ashamed of what you do?”

His features relaxed, and he stared at me with lucid eyes.

“No,” he said shyly. “I used to sell cakes, but the day before yesterday I came back to this job.”

“But you used to earn more?” I questioned.

“Yes,” he said, “but...”

He hung his head, as was his practice whenever he felt unduly vulnerable, and with his brush proceeded to beat the top of his box. Without raising his eyes, he whispered: “When I got hungry at the end of the night, I’d eat two or three of my cakes.”

I didn’t know how to react. I endeavored to run off, but found myself too weak to do so. The small head with the wiry black hair remained bent. Without knowing why, I raised my foot and placed it firmly on the hump of the box.

The skillful hands set to work, while the rough head nodded rhythmically over the shoe, and then that same voice reached me, saying simply: “Sir...you haven’t changed your shoes in a year. These shoes are cheap.”

The Revolutionary Journey of Ghassan Kanafani (2024)

Louis Brehony & Tahrir Hamdi

Lemon, blossom and Damask rose
You, my land, are the light of my eyes
Now a bullet, shrapnel
from the day we learned the path to freedom
Once a wish, now a song
Ghassan, Ghassan
Ghassan taught us the love of the cause

Ghazi Mikdashi¹

Resistance is the essence — these words embody the literary, artistic, theoretical and political life of Ghassan Kanafani. With his Palestine ablaze in popular defiance more than 50 years since his assassination, Ghassan has returned: his name sung by *thob*-wearing women, celebrating precious victories of released Palestinian political prisoners; his image on the walls of refugee camps and the T-shirts and banners of student activists; his name gracing solidarity encampments; onstage in reworkings of his plays and as a backdrop to politically conscious dance troupes; and in a new scramble to read his stories, articles and studies. Generation after generation, Ghassan teaches the love of the Palestinian cause.

Resistance, in its plethora of meanings and images, is what motivated Ghassan Kanafani to write. In his literary and political writings, the reader encounters the very essence of resistance, a resistance in action, thought and in language itself. Undoubtedly, Kanafani's Palestinian experience represents the very basis of his writings, whether literary, theoretical or political. Catastrophic suffering, displacement and dispossession have the effect of placing humanity under the spectre of the immediacy of death. This was indeed Kanafani's reality, which gave birth to his resistant and revolutionary mind.

The literary world knows his novels and short stories, with *Men in the Sun*, *Returning to Haifa* and the collection *Land of Sad Oranges* among his popular writings. These chronicles were fuelled by Kanafani's own displacement from the city of Akka in the 1948 Nakba, and a life among fellow refugees in Syria and Lebanon. The catastrophe, the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, pushed him to write, and he would admit that he could not pinpoint whether his literary or political development came first. He did, though, meet and work with his mentor and leader "al-Hakim"² George Habash years before he published his own writing.³ Kanafani's dozens of stories, including novels, short tales and theatrical scripts were, in fact, dwarfed by his contribution of hundreds of political articles, studies, analyses and manifestos; these were linked to the publications of organisations to which he

¹ Lyrics to the song "*Ghassan 'alimna hubb il qadiyya*" ["Ghassan Taught Us the Love of the Cause"], recorded by Ghazi Mikdashi and Firqat al-Koral al-Sha'bi,

² The wise" or "the doctor": George Habash was also a trained physician.

³ See "On Childhood, Literature, Marxism, the Front and *Al-Hadaf*, Chapter 1.

belonged, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and its precursor, the Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM). This book seeks to shine a light on these largely unknown political texts.

Linked to his activism, which reached an apex with his leading role in the PFLP and his editorship of its newspaper *al-Hadaf* (*The Target*) from July 1969 until his assassination by Israeli Mossad agents on 8 July 1972 Kanafani cut an extraordinarily engaged and prolific figure. Yet, as his daughter Leila Kanafani reminds us, “Ghassan was not a one man show”⁴ Much in his writing and cultural activities — he was also a skilled visual artist and one-time poet — was generated through collective input, discussion democratic centralism. The atmosphere he built around *al-Hadaf* was avant-garde, vivacious and internationalist. Inviting dissident Iragi theatre director Kasim Hawal to write and organise with the newspaper Beirut in 1969, Kanafani him: “Come with us, starve with us when we are hungry and be filled with us when we are full.”⁵ The works in this book should be read with the awareness that Kanafani was inextricable from his comrades in struggle and that some materials were written collaboratively.

It would likewise be impossible to separate Kanafani's “political” literature from his multi-pronged artistry. According to his friend and comrade Fadle al-Nakib, Kanafani “walked the path of total resistance”, combining all the skills and artforms at his disposal.⁶ Still — in Arabic, let alone in any other language — the contemporary world has seen only the tip of Kanafani's iceberg. Supposedly progressive areas of study, such as post-colonial theory, draw on anti-colonial and revolutionary thinkers, whose writings are readily available. But to this day, there has been no genuine effort or even recognition of Kanafani's work as a revolutionary intellectual of anti-imperialist liberation from Zionism, colonialism, global capitalism and Arab reaction. This book proposes to break this unjust silence on Ghassan Kanafani. Kanafani was Palestine's greatest Marxist thinker. His ideas — forged in the firepit of war, crisis and armed resistance — are flammable materials, rich in the lessons of the revolutionary sparks which ignited his era.

As the political and theoretical writings in this volume show, Kanafani was a revolutionary intellectual whose deep, critical consciousness put him ahead of his time. His development from a budding artist, thinker and *adib* (literary figure) as a youth in the mid-1950s, to a vastly experienced journal editor and polemicist still evolving at the time of his martyrdom, was very much a journey, a revolutionary *becoming*. His public beginnings came with his writing of the Palestinian story, through Nasserite Arabism, to Marxism-Leninism and its total liberation of the social consciousness. Throughout, Palestine was

⁴ Discussion with the editors, Beirut, July 2023.

⁵ Ahmad Badir, “Kasim Hawal: Hakatha 'ashtma' Ghassan Kanafani wa-'arifto [“How I Lived With and Knew Ghassan Kanafani”], *al-Hadaf* online, 8 August 2001, <https://hadfnews.ps/post/43604>

⁶ Ghassan Kanafani, *al-Dirasat al-Siyasiya: al-Majallad al-Khamis* [*Political Works: Volume 5*] (Cyprus: Rimal, 2015), 2.

always the focus of Kanafani's concern, the compass, or "cornerstone"⁷, that would unite Arabs and other peoples fighting Zionism, imperialism and capitalism.

Kanafani saw the dangers of turning the Palestinian cause into a religious, nativist or ethnic one; he would warn against any divisions between armed Palestinian factions, while underlining their class basis; he would underscore that the Palestinian *Nakba* is not an Arab-Israeli or Palestinian-Israeli *conflict*, but rather, he insisted, a confrontation between imperialism and an anti-imperialist liberation movement against brutal settler colonialism: and he would admonish Arab ruling classes seeking to liberalise or co-opt the struggle. At the root of his scientific socialist analysis was his identification of the poor, oppressed and disinherited masses — not the occupiers, financiers or compromising bourgeoisies — as the life blood and deciding factor in the fights to come. Our contention, by presenting his revolutionary words in today's contexts, is that Kanafani was an outstanding and sometimes prophetic visionary, whose works are as relevant today as they have ever been.

Ghassan Kanafani: A Biography

Soon after the 1948 Nakba, Damascus had become a hotbed of political radicalism. Inspired by Gamal Abdel Nasser's 1952 revolution in Egypt and by the Palestinians' violent displacement from their homeland, the city witnessed a coming together of young writers and intellectuals. Becoming organised, they converged around the Arab socialist printing press, where Ghassan Kanafani had begun as an apprentice. When he joined the editorial board of the ANM newspaper *al-Ra'i* (*The Viewpoint*) in 1955, he was barely 19 years old. The young Kanafani was recruited to the ANM by George Habash, one of the organisation's 1951 founders, and threw his talents into writing for the cause. During this period, Kanafani balanced studies, art, writing and editing with teaching in Kuwait, from where he would send most of his wages back to his Syria to support his proletarianised family.

The Kanafanis had left Akka on 9 April 1948, the day of the infamous Deir Yassin massacre, leaving behind their relative prosperity in a disjointed trip through Saida, southern Lebanon, and towards the Syrian capital. Kanafani would both lament and weaponise the by-products of his childhood schooling at the missionary Les Frères school, Yafa, where a focus on French and English had meant an imperfect early grasp of formal Arabic. In Damascus, Kanafani would develop rapidly and his private notebooks show a young man on a mission to contribute; his teaching career in UNRWA⁸ schools began while he was still a student. Embedded in the pan-Arab scene, Kanafani joined the Life and Literature group founded by *al-Ra'i* editor Hani al-Hindi in 1957, further combining his political and literary activities. Kanafani wrote a short story and political commentary for the paper every month, gave speeches at demonstrations and in the Palestinian refugee camps, and had theatrical pieces performed on the radio.

⁷ See "Resistance is the Essence", Chapter 4.

⁸ UNRWA: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

Al-Nakib remembered attending a meeting in summer 1959 at al-Farouq Café, Damascus, with ANM leader al-Hakam Druza bringing Kanafani, Ahmed Khalifa and Bilal al-Hassan to discuss the cultural strategy of the movement. Directed by the ANM, the group resolved excitedly to write a collection of short stories for distribution in the camps. Though the book was never published, Kanafani stood out for his insistence in commenting on the work of his comrades, provoking surprise and awe at his drive to be both writer and critic. It was also an indication of the level of collective thought behind the stories and novels that bore his name. A year later, Kanafani would be called upon to move to Beirut and edit the cultural section of the Movement's weekly magazine, *al-Hurriyya (Freedom)*. Lacking papers upon his arrival, Kanafani spent months in hiding, writing his most famous novel *Men in the Sun* in 1962, compelled by the grim realities faced by displaced Palestinians in the Arab Gulf.

By 1963, Kanafani had risen to the rank of editor-in-chief the new daily newspaper *al-Muharrir (The Liberator)*, as well as its bi-monthly *Filastin (Palestine)* supplement. Over a four-year period, Kanafani's daily writing would typically include a main news story, an editorial, a column in the paper, plus a short story, novel section or study for the cultural section. Kanafani would also travel throughout the Arab world and internationally as a reporter and political representative. On his visits to China, Kanafani wrote up long reports and interviews for *al-Muharrir* (1965) and took part in the Afro-Asian Writers Conference (1966). His work as editor of *al-Anwar (The Lights)* (July 1967–March 1970) and as editor in chief of *al-Hadaf* (from July 1969 until his death) multiplied his written output and sharpened his viewpoint into the critical, Marxist methodology we will discuss below.

The titles of Kanafani's seven novels, three plays and many short stories are well-known and repeatedly republished in Arabic, collectively forming one component of his oeuvre. Kanafani published hundreds of political articles and theorisations, under his own name as well as under the pseudonyms Abu al-Ezz, Ginkaf, Fares Fares, G., Abu Fayez, Rabie Matar and others still to be uncovered. Kanafani's prolificacy was underlined in a June 10>1 interview in which he reflected upon his role as a novelist in the Palestinian resistance movement:

Literature has a very important role to play in society, especially when it speaks directly to the people and is not abstract. When a writer, then, is committed to a certain cause, it is very difficult for him to be satisfied writing only novels...

We are, today, committed to the highest form of struggle, armed struggle, and for us events are always developing rapidly. We lose comrades every day. Day after day in fact, Comr.a are killed and then they are forgotten because others are killed. This makes it difficult to continue writing. It is unfair, under these circumstances, to ask the novelist to keep writing, because as soon as he begins to write he discovers that his writing belongs to the past even if he is attempting to write about the future. It is as if he is suspended and his generation, his comrades, are passing him by — advancing faster than he is. Therefore, there are times when a novelist can't write.

On the other hand, there are times that the novelist can't stop writing. The novelist lives, therefore, with this kind of contradiction, a kind of suffering.⁹

Many have been amazed at the prolific work of revolutionary Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali, a protégé of Kanafani, who published around 40,000 drawings (more than four per day) before his life was cut short in 1987. The same drive flourished in Ghassan Kanafani. According to Anni Kanafani, her husband "was always busy, working as if death was just around the corner".¹⁰ These descriptions are comparable to Edward Said's characterisation of "late style", an ironic, resistant approach, which "does not admit the definitive cadences of death; instead, death appears in a refracted mode, as irony"¹¹ This mortal realisation energised the potent energy and life of Kanafani's writings. After his assassination, Bassam al-Sherif told his comrades: "We must stick together. This is the path of the revolution — you must expect to lose a dear friend at any time."¹²

Kanafani had dabbled with poetry as a teenager, but his first love had been drawing. On top of his already burgeoning output, Kanafani would produce masses of paintings, pamphlet sleeves, graphics and iconic posters, combining imagery of Palestinian revolution with concrete demands and slogans. Among his 1969 works, for example, were: the novel *Returning to Haifa*; the play script *The Hat and the Prophet*; a critical editorial series in *al-Hadaf* of the post-1967 "settlement" promoted by Israel and its backers; a selection of literary reviews for *al-Anwar*, under the pseudonym Fares Fares; writing towards the epochal PFLP *Strategy for Liberation*; and an iconic, yellow poster proclaiming that: "The path of armed struggle is the path to a liberated Palestine". This is before the fact of Kanafani's additional responsibilities as PFLP central committee member and spokesperson. When foreign correspondents came to Beirut, journalist Talal Salman would take them straight to Kanafani.¹³ With the backdrop of huge prints of Guevara, Marx, Lenin, Hô, Habash and Palestinian *fida'iyya* Therese Halasa, behind the desk of the PFLP's Beirut office — a hive of organisation and international media — Kanafani's image was iconic, and his message clear to all who would listen.

In these intensely productive *al-Hadaf* years, where avant-garde Marxist literature joined hands with the *fida'i* struggle, Kanafani's leadership role in the PFLP became more pronounced. By the organisation's third congress, held in al-Beddawi camp, Lebanon in March 1972, Kanafani's forceful arguments on the need for a long-term war of liberation galvanised the attendees. He was elected to write the resulting document, *Tasks of the New Stage*, which concluded that, in the face of the liquidationist strategies of imperialism,

⁹ Interview with James Zogby, "Kanafani the Novelist", *Middle East International* 47 (May 1975): 27.

¹⁰ Anni Kanafani, Preface to Ghassan Kanafani, *On Zionist Literature*, trans. Mahmoud Najib (Oxford: Ebb, 2022), xiii

¹¹ Edward Said, *On Late Style* (New York: Pantheon, 2022), 27.

¹² Badir, "Kasim Hawal".

¹³ Editors interview with N Marwan Abd el-Al, 17 July 2023.

Zionism and Arab bourgeois opportunism: "The subject of building a Marxist-Leninist Party is now a central issue for the Palestinian revolution."¹⁴

The PFLP had a rocky relationship with the PLO and Kanafani was a key critic, while calling for a principled national unity. At the same time, he combined with Majed Abu Sharar and Kamal Nasser to form the PLO Information Office. Within a decade, all three had been assassinated by Zionist paramilitaries. Kanafani was killed just before 10:30am on 8 July 1972, blown apart with his 17-year-old niece Lamis Najm, after Mossad agents detonated their car bomb in Hazmieh. Though it had been a barely concealed secret, the Zionist state did not admit to killing Kanafani until 2005, as an Ariel Sharon-led regime sought to crush another intifada.¹⁵ Kanafani's martyrdom came as Golda Meir had formed a sub-government committee dedicated to wiping out Palestinian leaders. Its members included war criminals Moshe Dayyan, Yig'al Alon, Yesrael Galilee, Zfika Zamir, Aharon Yariv and Rehavam Ze'evi. Ze'evi was killed in a Palestinian operation on 17 October 2001 in response to the murder of PFLP leader Abu Ali Mustafa.

In the wake of 8 July, the Zionist *Haaretz* newspaper celebrated the killing of the "PFLP No. 3",¹⁶ while *Maariv* painted his killing as part of a continuing "war on terrorism".¹⁷ Patrice Lumumba, Mehdi Ben Barka, Che Guevara, Kwame Nkrumah: the wider war on revolutionary anti-colonial movements was international, Amilcar Cabral and Walter Rodney would join the list and, by the end of the 1980s, Lebanese communist Mahdi Amel and Palestinian artist Naji al-Ali would fall to the hit-lists of reaction and imperialist racism. The Lebanese *Daily Star* announced: "There will never be another Ghassan Kanafani." Al-Hakim admitted in a letter to Anni Kanafani, "we have taken a really painful hit."¹⁸

Ghassan Kanafani was killed for his committed approach to revolutionary culture and for his leading role in the PFLP. Asad AbuKhalil writes: "Presumably, Israel wanted to kill Kanafani and silence his voice. Yet the plan did not work as intended."¹⁹ Decades on from his killing, "Kanafani's presence is ubiquitous". His image means identification with the forces and methods of "total resistance" and a commitment to revolutionary critique. Palestinian political prisoners organise study days to understand his works; his significance is restated at commemorations in the camps; his books are read widely, and

¹⁴ *Foundational Texts of the PFLP* (Utrecht: Foreign Languages Press, forthcoming).

¹⁵ Elitan Haber, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 3 October 2005.

¹⁶ The article claimed that Kanafani was a "planner" of the Lydd airport attack carried out by Japanese Red Army militants on 30 May 1972. *Haaretz*, 9 July 1972.

¹⁷ "The Killing of Kanafani", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 2, no. 1 (1972): 149, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2535986>.

¹⁸ George Habash, *Safhat Min Masirti al-Nidaliya [Pages of My Path of Struggle]* (Lebanon: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2019), 219.

¹⁹ Asad AbuKhalil, "The Second Life of Ghassan Kanafani", *The Electronic Intifada*, 12 July 2017, <https://electronicintifada.net/content/second-life-ghassan-kanafani/21051>.

film adaptations of his novels re-released; and Kanafani remains the central intellectual figure in Palestinian leftist imaginations, despite his attempted co-option by forces linked to the Palestinian Authority. "As regards peace" Kanafani once said. "it cannot be established on the basis of injustice."²⁰

"Words Were Bullets": "Ghassan Kanafani's Palestinian Marxism

History is not produced by a magic wand but is transformed by the masses who understand it and are determined to change it.

"The Resistance and its Challenges", 1970

On a late Saturday evening in summer 1970, Fadle al-Nakib was Ghassan Kanafani's guest in Beirut, with the two planning a trip to the mountains the next day. Driving, Kanafani apologised profusely that he'd forgotten something important in the *al-Hadaf* offices and rushed back to collect it. He returned to the car carrying a pamphlet he had read and re-read, and which was required material in the *fida'i* training camps: Lenin's *State and Revolution*.²¹

For Kanafani, art and politics were inseparable. In 1968, he contrasted the 'Resistance Literature in Occupied Palestine' to the "poetry of exile", with the former characterised not by "a note of lamentation or despair, but reflect[ing] an admirable hope and a constant revolutionary fervour"²² This philosophical reasoning has proven its validity, not only in what Kanafani called resistance literature, but also in the real-life experiences of the oppressed, the defiantly resistant Palestinian masses. That Palestinians continue to constitute a fighting people is witnessed to this day in Palestine under occupation (enin refugee camp) and constant, genocidal siege (Gaza). Thus, the consummate negativity of Zionist colonial settler brutality does indeed delineate the mirror-image of its opposite — fierce Palestinian resistance — a concept that Kanafani theorised in his characterisation of resistance literature. His Own literature was built in this image and evolved with a collective shift towards Marxism.

Kanafani was a lifelong socialist, but the parameters and conceptualisation of his socialism changed with the dramatic transformation of the Palestinian movement in the 1960s. From the outset of his political life, he presented a sharp awareness that extreme forms of occupation, siege, oppression and suffering could only produce their opposite in the

²⁰ Clara Halter, *The Liberation of the Occupied Territories is Only the First Step*, *New Middle East*, September 1970.

²¹ Kanafani *al-Dirasatal Siastyah*, 47. Al-Nakib is mistaken, however, in stating that Kanafani's purpose of revisiting Lenin was towards the study, "*Al-Markssiyah fi al-Majal al-Nazari, al-Majal al-Tatbiqi: Munaqasha*" ("Marxism in Theory and Practice: A Discussion"), contained in the same volume. The notebook carried the clear signs of Ghassan Kanafani's earlier position and, as confirmed by Anni and Leila Kanafani, had actually been written in the mid-late 1950s, not in 1970. It is possible that the study he was working on at the point of this meeting with al-Nakib was *The Underlying Synthesis of the Revolution*, published the following year and which focused on the relevance of Marxism-Leninism as demonstrated in the Vietnamese struggle.

²² Ghassan Kanafany [sic.], "Resistance Literature in Occupied Palestine, *Lotus Journal* 1, nos 1-2 (1968): 70.

oppressed — a fierce resistance to a barbaric settler colonialism. In his notebooks in the late 1950s, Kanafani saw socialism as “the right of all people to live their lives enjoying all of their basic human rights”.²³ Like Habash Wadi Haddad and other ANM comrades, Kanafani's concept of revolution in this early period was tied primarily to the wave of anti-colonial resistance heralded by Nasserism.

Founded in February 1958, while Kanafani worked in Kuwait, the Egypt-Syria United Arab Republic (UAR) represented an opportunity to “change the history of the region” and “destabilise” the strategic and colonial interests of outside forces.²⁴ Kanafani developed an understanding of imperialism, Arab reaction and opportunism from this basis, during a time in which the Palestinian resistance movement was slowly rebuilding itself. Initially, at least, the ANM saw their role as supporting agents to the Cairo-led challenge, seeing regional developments through the lens of this confrontation while pushing for principled Arab unity. The Ba'athist takeover in Iraq, for instance, was violently opposed to the communists and Kurds, on whom Kanafani saw the Ba'athists “waging a war of extermination” in 1963,²⁵ but also to the anti-imperialist unity represented by the UAR.

Included in Kanafani's early critique were pro-Soviet communists, and particularly those official Arab communist parties presenting class-based critiques of Nasserism. In the pages of the Egyptian-funded *al-Muharrir* newspaper, Kanafani and other writers saw the kind of charismatic leadership represented by Nasser as providing a necessary figurehead to the Arab socialist movement, inspiring the people to struggle. This line was maintained through the dark days of the June 1967 *hazima* (defeat),²⁶ but the full scale of the conquest by Zionist forces was soon revealed more broadly. In the months after this catastrophic setback, Kanafani reflected that only the fighting people could genuinely decide the fate of Palestine and the whole region.²⁷ Working-class and oppressed peoples would lead any genuine liberation movement.

Kanafani later attacked Nasserism for its compliance with the US Rogers Plan in summer 1970, standing against the politics of “surrender” and “attempt[s] to drive a wedge between the resistance and the masses”.²⁸ For Kanafani and his comrades, true socialism had come

²³ “*Al-Manhaj al-Tatbi' al-Ishtirakiyya al-Arabiyya*” [“Methodology for Implementing Arab Socialism”], in Adnan Kanafani (ed.), *Ghassan Kanafani: Ma rij al-Ibda'* [*Ghassan Kanafani: The Rise to Ingenuity*] (Jordan: Dar Mu'assasat Filastin lil-Thaqafa, 2009), 181. Translation by Amira Silmi.

²⁴ “*Al-Qadiyya al-'Arabiyya Fi Ahd Jim 'Ayn Mim*” [“The Arab Cause in the Era of the UAR”], in Kanafani, *al-Dirasat al-Siyasiyya*, 145-46. Translation by Ameen Nemer.

²⁵ *Al-Muharrir*, 22 November 1963.

²⁶ Kanafani and his comrades generally did not use the word *naksa*, or setback, to describe the events of June 1967.

²⁷ See “Resistance is the Essence”, Chapter 4.

²⁸ George Hajar, *Kanafani: Symbol of Palestine* (Lebanon: Karoun, 1974), 122-23. On 23 July 1970, Nasser accepted the proposals of US Secretary of State William Rogers for a ceasefire between Egypt and Israel, in what was dubbed the “Second Rogers' Plan”. The basis of Rogers proposals was seeking Arab recognition of the rights to a “secure” Israel, with no commitment to ending the occupations of 1967 or of 1948.

to mean embracing Marxism-Leninism. This evolution can be traced, in part, through the groups position on the Soviet Union, coming to recognise its role as a "major supporter of the Arab masses in their fight against imperialism" in the period of rising liberation struggle.²⁹ It is crucial to add that Kanafani's earlier ideas were just that, with incomplete essays such as "Marxism in Theory and Practice" and "A Methodology for Implementing Arab Socialism" forming sketchpads composed more than a decade before his killing, and which he would choose not to publish. Like Che Guevara, Kanafani had been critical of the Soviet model, but helped to develop the PFLP SO that the Soviet Union represented a positive counterbalance to US-led imperialist interventionism; the organisation also received Soviet weaponry, training and scholarships.

Kanafani and other PFLP figures would describe the June 1967 defeat in transformative terms, as the final impetus towards a higher mode of thinking. The founding statement of the PFLP on 11 December referenced the *hazima* as heralding a "new phase... in which the revolutionary masses must take on leadership responsibility" in the fight against imperialism and Zionism.³⁰ Habash explained that, though this did not negate the role of progressive Arab forces in the fight for regional liberation, the experience of Vietnam showed that "the confrontation must have as its basis the organised and armed masses".³¹ The realisation that this meant a deeper adoption of Marxism . "the ideology of the working class"³² was also based on an understanding of the role of regional bourgeoisies — and petit bourgeoisies, as Kanafani and his comrades came to view Egypt's leaders — in acting to liquidate the revolutionary trend. Third World Marxism, wrote Rodney, answered the "failure of bourgeois thought to deliver the goods".³³

This ideological and organisational shift did not occur overnight. As early as 1964, Habash had led discussions in the ANM towards establishing the Palestinian branch as an alternative to the organisation's Leadership Committee for Palestinian Work, spurred on by the Nasser government's insistence that the cause should remain under its leadership.³⁴ The "third stage" in this relationship after 1967, writes Matar, meant breaking with Nasserism and forging anew Path.³⁵ The fight for "Arab Hanois", taken up vociferously by Kanafani, found roots in this earlier stage. On his watch, *Filastin* magazine had published features on the Vietnamese "art of guerrilla warfare" in 1965³⁶ arguing with reference to

²⁹ See "Excerpts from PFLP: Strategy for the Liberation of Palestine", Chapter 7.

³⁰ *Foundational Texts of the PFLP*.

³¹ Habash, *Safhat Min Masirti al-Nidaliya*, 150.

³² Habash, *Safhat Min Masirti al-Nidaliya*.

³³ Walter Rodney, *Decolonial Marxism: Essays from the Pan-African Revolution* (London: Verso, 2022), 66.

³⁴ Fouad Matar, *Hakim al-Thawra: Sirat George Habash wa-Nidalu* [Wise Man of the Revolution: Biography of George Habash and his Struggle] (Beirut: An-Nahar House, 2008), 99.

³⁵ Matar, *Hakim al-Thawra*, 100.

³⁶ *Filastin*, 29 January 1965. There is currently no way of ascertaining whether Kanafani wrote the unsigned article himself.

the communists victories SO far and against the grain of Nasserism — that this strategy was the only path to liberation.

Visiting socialist China in August 1964, Claudia Jones in her poem "Yenan — Cradle of the Revolution", hailed:

Yenan — Cradle of the Revolution;
Of their dreams, their fight;
Their organisation, their heroism.³⁷

The influence of Kanafani's two Chinese trips, in 1965 and 1966, also left a comparably profound mark on his thinking. Covering 150 pages, *Then Shone Asia...* charts this journey, as well as Kanafani's impressions of post-independence India. Writing after 1967, he drew on Mao's reflections of the Chinese war of liberation against Japanese imperialism, an appreciable focus on the role of the vanguard organisation, and Palestinianised the questions raised by both Mao and Hồ: "Who are our enemies? Who are our friends?" The central references of Kanafani's political work during this period included Lenin, Lukács and Stalin, along with Mao, Hồ and Giáp. Underlining the collectivist underpinnings of such readings, the PFLP cadre schools — of which Kanafani was an enthusiastic proponent — included in their curriculum many of the same works and authors, along with Marx and Engels, and readings on the Chinese, Cuban, Korean, Soviet and Vietnamese experiences.³⁸

Although Kanafani was only 36 years old at the time of his assassination, he left behind a reservoir of literary, political and theoretical work. So, what were his main theoretical contributions? This book offers many indications:

- Kanafani was the first intellectual to apply Marxist class analysis to the Palestinian situation, demonstrated in his scandalously under-referenced work on the 1936-1939 revolution and shown further in his reflections on the crisis after 1967.
- The mobile, octopus-like body of imperialism was analysed in terms of regional power and what represented, seeing Zionism as an outpost of British and later US imperialist interests in the Middle East.
- Kanafani detailed the relevance of communist-led anti-colonial liberation movements to the Palestinian case and inseparable bonds between questions of theory, organisation and practice.
- Palestine was central, in his mind, to the wider cause of Arab freedom. Indeed, he refused to see Palestine — or indeed any cause — as existing in a bubble, as shown by his

³⁷ Carole Boyce Davies (ed.). *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment* (London: Ayebia, 2011), 203.

³⁸ Gérard Chaliand, *The Palestinian Resistance* (London: Pelican, 1972), 157-58.

references to popular movements in Denmark, Vietnam, Yemen and many other examples.

- Kanafani understood and connected the normalisation of racism in oppressor nations to the settler colonial project, beginning to critique Orientalism before its expansive application by Said.
- And, in describing the resistance movement in materialist terms, Kanafani — like Che, Fidel, Fanon, Hồ and Kollontai — was able to envisage that a new human being would necessarily be generated by the revolutionary movement.

What distances Kanafani from those who came after — and, indeed from the navel-gazing academics of his time — is the conviction that the idea of revolutionary organisation must be raised alongside questions of theory and critique. Kanafani was not a rank-and-file PFLP cadre, but the Front's intellectual emissary. Like Mahdi Amel, Kanafani did not describe the Middle East in "post-colonial" terms, seeing an "ongoing process of plunder",³⁹ underpinning continuing imperialist interventions in the region. Zionism and Arab reaction were not the puppet masters, but rather existed to represent imperialism, which stood behind their moves. Appearing on front pages of *al-Hadaf*, Lenin was a foundational influence, whose theory of imperialism helped Kanafani to analyse such events as the 1967 defeat, the standpoints of Arab states after Black September, and the Saudi-spearheaded intervention against the socialist liberation movement in Yemen.

Kanafani was a leader in the shift by which Palestinian Socialists addressed the question of the vanguard, prophetically seeing the resistance in Gaza as showing the way forward. From his place of exile in different Arab capitals, including Damascus, Kuwait and Beirut, Kanafani theorised about the absolute necessity of a constructive unity of Palestinian organisations before mounting a successful armed struggle for liberation, the culture of resistance, the transformation of the masses, the making of new human beings to enable successful decolonisation and liberation, and transnational solidarity with other liberation movements from around the world. According to his comrade Salah Salah: "As far as Ghassan was concerned, words were bullets."⁴⁰

A Word On Translation

The late writer, translator and activist Barbara Harlow reminds us of a "larger and collective political agenda" attached to the acts of translating.⁴¹ We were reminded this fact when looking again at the English versions of PFLP documents from 1969-1972, with omissions, selective word choices and explanations aimed at anglophone readers. Kanafani

³⁹ See "The Resistance and its Challenges", Chapter 8.

⁴⁰ Salah Salah in *Ghassan Kanafani: Al-Kalima al-Bunduqiyya* [Ghassan Kanafani: Word of the Rifle], directed by Kassem Hawal (Palestine, 1973), Al Jazeera documentary, 16 June 2017.

⁴¹ Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (London: Methuen, 1987), 25.

had been part of the organisation's Information Department, which led this work, and was a habitual translator himself. His translation practices ranged from columns analysing racist and biased Western press reports of events in the Middle East, to Marxist extracts into Arabic for the purpose of his studies, or, as on his epic journeys to China, carrying out interviews in English to be translated for Arab readers. His wife Anni remembers that he'd translate his novels and other writings into English for her own understanding.

The work of translation is an inexact science of infinite permutations and with justice rarely done to source-language idioms. While our collective is satisfied with the results, we remind the reader that translation is also an act of (politically) guided interpretation. To make our process as rigorous as possible, work by the initial translator was put through two thorough peer reviews, before any final editing took place. Guidance for this work also came from the seminal existing translations we were able to include in the volume, with honourable mention to Barbara Harlow and Nejd Yaziji. We also looked to the Marxist canon which formed a bulk of Kanafani's reading since the 1950s; the noun *al-raja 'iyya*, for example which he and his comrades used to describe reactionary Arab regimes appears as "reaction" in the work of Irish socialist James Connolly,⁴² as well as in the English language works of Leila Khaled,⁴³ and others of Ghassan Kanafani's generation.

Each text presented different challenges, from locating the quotes and citations used by Kanafani in their original English or Arabic, to questions of whether or how to standardise the works' political vocabulary and syntax. Translating and introducing Ghassan, you have to be an artist", as Khaled Barakat quipped early on in the project. So, the interpretation of his work is simultaneously political and poetic — personifying its writer. The creative approach at play between members of the translating collective raised discussions on a wide number of words, phrases and passages. The title of the 1967 article included here as Chapter 4, for instance, is "*al-muqawama hiyya al-as*". This could mean "Resistance is the Basis", "...the Source", "...the Foundation, and so on. Its translation as "Resistance is the Essence", we think, gets to the crux of Kanafani's argument on the 1967 defeat and its aftermath: the struggle of the masses is key, essential. This discussion hints at a central tenet of our approach: the goal was to communicate the essence of Kanafani's argument.

The collective also looked critically at previously translated works. One of our debates centred around the term *'amal fida'i*, translated in early PFLP documents as "commando action". The consensus was that we should retain the Arabic for *fida'i*, with the *fida'iyyin* representing both an enduring armed struggle and constituting a recognised emblem of the Palestinian liberation movement. Likewise, Palestinian concepts of *sumud* (steadfastness) have also entered into common use. With this in mind, we considered which other Arabic language words and phrases may be retained to better communicate Kanafani's meaning.

⁴² James Connolly, "Labour and the Proposed Partition of Ireland", from *Irish Worker*, 14 March 1914, Digital version by *Marxists Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1914/03/laborpar.htm>.

⁴³ Leila Khaled, *My People Shall Live: The Autobiography of a Revolutionary* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973 [1971]), p. 57.

We considered replacing the English word resistance with its Arabic, *muqawama*, which would set the Palestinian struggle on its own terms, identifying Kanafani with new generations utilising the same vocabulary. However — and this relates to one facet of the international battle analysed in this book — being able to openly assert one's right to support anti-Zionist Palestinian *resistance* is both an iterative and material fight, taking place in and beyond English-speaking countries. We were mindful that this right is asserted openly and unashamedly in the face of ruling-class onslaughts upon Palestinian activism, renewed venomously after the launch of Operation Al-Agsa Flood on 7 October 2023.

Not since the prolific early days of Palestinian media committees or the vigorous translations of Harlow and Yaziji has there been a greater hunger to translate revolutionary Palestine for international readerships. Our work stands alongside the new translations by Mahmoud Najib of *On Zionist Literature* (Ebb books, 2022) and Hazem Jamjoum of *The Revolution of 1936-39 in Palestine* (1804 books, 2023), with many more translations of Kanafani's literary and political materials hopefully on the way. The reception to these works shows that the mini-explosion of interest in Kanafani's writings among Arabic-speaking Palestinians threatens to boil over into the world at large. Presenting Kanafani's Marxist works also means situating his contribution alongside newly published texts by Mahdi Amel, Amílcar Cabral, Che Guevara, Hồ Chí Minh, Claudia Jones and Walter Rodney.

Long may the Ghassan Kanafani revolution continue!