

Research Article

Mapping the Palestinian Diasporic Identity through Ghassan Kanafani's "The Land of Sad Oranges"

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Abstract: This paper endeavours to explore the theme of identity and diaspora in Ghassan Kanafani's short story "The Land of Sad Oranges" from his collection "Men in the Sun and Other Stories". The selected story captures the heartbreak of exile and the yearning for a lost homeland. The narrative serves as a powerful exploration of displacement, portraying the emotional and psychological toll on those forced to leave their homes. It transcends the personal, becoming a symbol of collective memory and identity. The narrative employs the orange to represent not only psychological and social devastation but also the broader implications of political displacement. Through qualitative research paradigm backed by the in-depth content analysis, this study delves into how Kanafani delineates with microscopic meticulousness the emotional and familial catastrophes wrought by forced exodus. The story encapsulates the multifaceted dimensions of Palestinian suffering, from the pervasive sense of nostalgia to the harsh acceptance of exile. Kanafani's depiction of these themes underscores the universal struggle for identity and belonging in the face of displacement and loss, providing an evocative portrayal of the Palestinian experience.

Keywords: Palestine; diaspora; identity; displacement

1. Introduction

In recent times, the concepts of diaspora and locality have gained intricate and nuanced meanings within the realms of policy discourse, cultural studies, and social analysis. The notion of diaspora, in particular, has expanded "to encompass various interpretations and ideas, touching upon themes of universal separation, national immigration, and the hybridity of cultures." (Alfonso et al., 2004) When contemplating diaspora and nationalism, one inevitably thinks of the emotional resonance of distance and homesickness. The word "diaspora" itself carries profound significance, embodying a rich history and evolving connotations. Understanding the trajectory of this term's use is critical for grasping the shifts in nationalism discourse since the 1960s. The term "diaspora" originates from ancient Greek, making its first appearance in the Hebrew Bible to denote the divine punishment awaiting Jews who failed to obey God's commandments. Initially, the term was primarily used in religious contexts, referring to Jews, and later to Catholics and Protestants, as ethnic minorities. This usage imbued the term with a sense of exile and persecution, representing a forced expulsion from one's homeland and an existence marked by ostracism and marginalization (Sa'di, 2015). However, beginning in the 1960s, the term began to shed its exclusively negative connotations, undergoing a radical transformation. It secularized, finding a place in the social sciences as a concept applicable beyond religious traditions. This transition was fueled by a growing academic interest in the experiences of African-descended peoples in the New World. Scholars began to explore the resilience and identity of these communities, which had often faced discrimination based on skin colour. This academic focus allowed these groups to assert a shared heritage and establish symbolic connections to Africa, despite the historical trauma of forced migration and slavery. The changing relationship between the state of Israel and the global Jewish population further influenced the conceptual evolution of diaspora. The establishment of Israel was a key moment in Zionist ideology, which sought to reject the notion of a scattered Jewish existence and instead promote the idea of a unified Jewish homeland. Despite this, millions of Jews chose not to

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relocate to Israel under the Law of Return, highlighting the complexities of national identity and belonging. This phenomenon underscored the idea that a nation's identity is not solely confined to its geographical borders; rather, it can encompass a global community united by shared history and cultural heritage. Today, the term "diaspora" encompasses a broader and more complex range of meanings. It can refer to the scattering of a nation without a sovereign homeland, such as the Palestinian diaspora, which emerged in 1948 following the establishment of Israel and the displacement of Palestinians (Schulz, 2003). Alternatively, it can describe a culturally diverse society that identifies with a collective heritage, even without a central geographical core, as seen in the African or Black diaspora. This contemporary understanding of diaspora reflects an increasing recognition of multiple, overlapping racial and national identities, as well as the enduring importance of cultural connections across time and space.

In recent decades, the semantic scope of diaspora has expanded considerably, moving beyond its historically anchored associations with Jewish, Armenian, and Greek experiences toward more contested and contemporary applications. This conceptual broadening has often shifted emphasis away from religion as a central defining element, situating the term within broader analytical frameworks of migration, transnationalism, and identity formation. Nevertheless, religious belief, symbolic frameworks, and hierarchical structures remain integral to the articulation of many diasporic identities. Comparative studies and ethnographic research continue to demonstrate that, while the term should not be restricted to faith-based enclaves within clearly demarcated denominational territories, religion retains a formative role in numerous diasporic contexts. In 1947, the Arab population of Palestine approached 1.5 million, with the majority residing in rural districts. Subsequent political upheavals, military conflict, and mass displacement resulted in a Palestinian population that, decades later, numbered close to five million, a substantial proportion of whom were dispersed beyond the boundaries of Mandatory Palestine – either in exile or in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza. Jordan currently hosts the largest Palestinian community, where individuals of Palestinian descent constitute more than half the national population. Large concentrations also exist in Lebanon, Kuwait, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, while smaller communities are found in Iraq, Libya, Egypt, and Cyprus. In the United States, Palestinians, particularly Christians from West Bank cities, form distinct migrant enclaves.

Palestinian mobility predates the 1948 war. Under the British Mandate, civil servants and professionals migrated to Britain, a movement reinforced in the 1960s and 1970s by the arrival of hundreds of students. In South America, early migrants – many escaping Ottoman military conscription during the First World War – established settlements in Chile and Argentina, which grew substantially after 1948. Today, these communities, now in their fourth generation, are among the most economically prosperous in the Palestinian diaspora. For many others, displacement was abrupt and involuntary, driven by the 1948 hostilities. Armed engagements between Palestinian fighters and Zionist paramilitary groups such as the Haganah, combined with heavy bombardment, triggered large-scale flight. The massacre at Dayr Yasin, in which over 250 people were killed, intensified the exodus. Many sought refuge in Jordanian-administered West Bank territories, while those from the coastal areas relocated to Gaza or Egypt. The conflict thus produced a geographically dispersed Palestinian population whose settlement patterns continue to reflect the legacies of war, forced migration, and transnational connections.

The current study endeavours to address the following research questions:

1. How does Kanafani employ symbols, such as the orange, to reflect the emotional and psychological experiences of Palestinian displacement?
2. What broader socio-political implications of diaspora and displacement are conveyed through the story's portrayal of personal suffering?

2. Materials and Methods

This study will use a qualitative approach based on thematic textual analysis to critically examine the selected short story from the anthology. The research will involve techniques such as close reading, detailed content analysis, and comparison of ideas within the text. The process will include a careful reading of the primary work, supported by references to relevant secondary sources and critical studies. This will help ensure a comprehensive understanding of the text. The data will consist of selected words, phrases, and passages from the writer's work. Content analysis will be used to interpret and evaluate this material.

The primary data comprises the text of the short story "The Land of Sad Oranges" from



“Men in the Sun and Other Stories” (1992). Secondary data includes scholarly articles, books, critical essays, and historical accounts on Palestinian displacement, diaspora studies, and literary symbolism. Relevant works by academics have been reviewed to support contextual understanding. Data has been collected from online academic databases, and peer-reviewed journals.

The data analysis follows a multi-step process: (1) close reading; (2) content analysis; (3) thematic interpretation; and (4) comparative insight.

The first step refers to the fact that the primary text is carefully read multiple times to identify key themes, symbols, narrative techniques, and emotional responses. The second one concerns selected excerpts, dialogues, and imagery associated with the themes of exile, nostalgia, identity loss, and resilience are coded and categorized. Thematic interpretation means that the coded data is further examined to reveal how the narrative constructs the Palestinian diasporic identity through emotional symbolism, particularly the motif of the orange. The fourth step explains that the findings are compared with existing scholarly literature on diaspora, exile, and identity formation to validate interpretations and highlight the unique contribution of Kanafani’s storytelling.

This study relies solely on textual and published secondary data, ensuring that the intellectual property rights of the authors are respected. Care has been taken to represent the themes sensitively, without imposing personal or political bias on the text. Interpretations are grounded in textual evidence and existing scholarship to uphold academic integrity and authenticity.

The study is limited to one short story from Kanafani’s collection and may not fully represent all facets of Palestinian displacement or the broader political context. The reliance on available secondary sources and translations may also constrain interpretive depth. Furthermore, as qualitative research is subjective, alternate readings and perspectives may provide additional insights that this study does not encompass.

3. Results and Discussion

“Men in the Sun and Other Stories” is short story anthology by the renowned Palestinian journalist and writer Ghassan Fayiz Kanafani (1936-72) translated from Arabic into English by Hilary Kilpatrick. This book offers a stark portrayal of the Palestinian experience during and after the 1948 Palestine war. The stories are a poignant exploration of the profound impact of war, capturing the enduring pain and resilience of a people caught in war. From this anthology, the short story originally published in 1958 under the title “Ard al-Burtuqal al-Hazin” and translated as “The Land of Sad Oranges” will be the subject of critical appraisal. This story is a first person narrative by a young child to a friend. Through the eyes of a Palestinian protagonist, Kanafani weaves a compelling narrative of a family uprooted from their homeland, grappling with the harsh realities of displacement and loss. The narrative opens as the family moves from Jaffa to Acre. Initially, the tone is deceptively light: “Our exit was not catastrophic in any way. We were just like everyone else who spend the festival season in a different city every year.” The young narrator enjoys his days in Acre, relieved from the obligation of attending school. However, this brief sense of relief is shattered by a massive assault on Acre, abruptly changing the mood. The contrast between the early optimism and the bleak conclusion becomes central to the story’s structure. Siddiq rightly sums up that in this story Kanafani evocatively depicts the “haunting physical and psychological details of the degradation of a well settled middle class Palestinian family to homeless refugees” (Siddiq, 1984). These lines from the story stand witness to his argument:

I sat silently, with my chin between my knees and my arms wrapped round them.
The grooves of orange trees followed each other in succession...We were all eaten up with fear and the sound of distant shots rang out like a farewell
(Kanafani, 1998, p. 78).

At its core, the story depicts the absence, loss, and deprivation of childhood. It is also a deeply moving account of two families forced into exile from their homes. Widely regarded as one of Kanafani’s most autobiographical works, the narrative reflects the protagonist’s sense of instability, dislocation, fear, and uncertainty – emotions drawn from Kanafani’s own childhood experience of expulsion from Palestine (Attar, 2007). He recalls the moment of departure vividly: large vans waiting at the door, blankets hastily thrown inside, and the panic that followed the retreat of the Arab armies from Palestine. As he fled in the evening, he realised, “As I was fleeing and running away from home, I also escaped from my childhood as well.” Kanafani’s storytelling not only reconstructs the events themselves but also captures



the atmosphere and emotions that surrounded them. This blending of personal memory with historical events heightens the sense of catastrophe, one that is not lessened by our awareness of its autobiographical basis. By focusing on the everyday tragedy of a Palestinian family rather than theorizing about the broader historical causes, Kanafani roots the story in personal testimony. His refusal to impose his own political interpretation on the family's flight from Palestine allows the narrative to transcend autobiography. The characters gain a universal quality, their expulsion and exile becoming an emblem for all who endure the anguish of displacement. As a result, the story can be read simultaneously as personal memory, as a precise portrayal of the Palestinian condition, and as a symbolic expression of the wider experience of diaspora.

Families, along with their belongings, are crowded into trucks that pass through orange groves under the sound of gunfire. During the journey, they buy oranges, which the child associates with the sound of crying: "I felt then that the oranges were something dear, and these tall, clean fruits were cherished things in our eyes." (Kanafani, 1998, p. 58) This association turns the orange into a powerful symbol – both personal and national. The narrator wails that the "[women] picked up the oranges, and the sound of their weeping reached our ears." (Kanafani, 1998, p. 76). As people cross into Lebanon, leaving behind the orange groves, the father's tears link Palestine irrevocably with sorrow. He says,

[A]ll the orange trees which your father had abandoned to the Jews shone in his eyes, all the well-tended orange tree which he had bought one by one were printed on his face and reflected in the tears which he could not control in front of the officer at the police post. The coloured pictures which were handed out to us in the school chapel showing the Lord having compassion on children and smiling in their faces seemed like another of the lies made up by people. (Kanafani, 1998, p. 58)

For a young boy, such thoughts are painfully naïve, shaped only by the harsh circumstances surrounding him. This loss of innocence becomes visible in a reflective moment that sharply contrasts with his earlier joy at skipping school. The family has nowhere to spend the night, but an uncle offers some help. They go to a Jewish home, where the man at the door tells them to "go to Palestine" (Kanafani, 1998, p. 59). His hopelessness frightens everyone, and the Jews withdraw to another room. After three days and nights of uncertainty, the Palestinian family finally rests on the ground. They later travel to Sidon in Lebanon, and on May 15, 1948, the Arab armies arrive in Palestine. This sparks a surge of hope among the refugees, who believe the armies will help them return home. In their excitement, some even run after the soldiers, throwing them cigarettes. However, these hopes are soon crushed. As the narrator recalls, "We were duped, and we were tricked by the reality with all its soreness and bitterness. Despair and low spirits have found their ways back to people's faces" (Kanafani, 1998, p. 60). Amid this hardship, the father becomes tense and irritable. He sends the children up the hill each morning, only to keep them from asking for breakfast. One day, he suddenly leaps onto a car boot, frantically tossing out its contents. Shaking "like he has received an electric shock" (Kanafani, 1998, p. 61) and with his eyes glowing, he searches for something his wife immediately understands – she again sends the children to the mountain. By accident, the narrator overhears his father saying he intends to kill the whole family, including himself. This deep hopelessness drives him to see death as the only escape. The narrator too, still innocent yet aware of his pain, admits that when he left his home, he also left behind his childhood. He echoes his father's despair, saying that the only solution left was "one bullet in the head" for each of them. Returning later and looking into the room, he sees his father lying ill in bed. On the table beside him are two objects: a gun and an orange bought long ago at a fair. The orange is now shriveled and drying out (Kanafani, 1998, p. 58).

The orange symbolizes the happiness and comfort of life in Palestine – a fruit that is whole, fragrant, and produced with care, representing livelihood, freedom, and simplicity. When the refugees fled, they also left behind this world of oranges. Its decay mirrors the death of innocence, the loss of home, identity, and dreams. The dry seeds embody the devastation of Palestinian hopes by an enemy willing to destroy even children. The rifle, on the other hand, represents death and finality, reflecting the father's surrender to despair.

Kanafani's choice to narrate the story through a child's perspective is crucial. It transforms the narrative from a political commentary into a deeply unsettling human experience (Khoury, 2013). The contrast between the child's innocence and the harsh events he recounts intensifies the feelings of displacement and fear. This gap between what he was taught about a merciful God at school and God's apparent absence in such a moment of



suffering leads him to question the very beliefs he once accepted. These are lines from the book:

I doubted whether this God really wanted to make men happy. I also doubted whether this God could hear and see everything. The coloured pictures showing the Lord having compassion on children and smiling in their faces seemed like another of the lies made up. I was sure that the God we had known in Palestine had left it too, and was a refugee in some place (Kanafani, 1998, p. 77).

One more heart wrenching feeling is so evocatively depicted by Kanafani in these lines when the narrator says, “I saw your father’s face quiver with broken rage, and I saw, at the same time, that black pistol on the low table. Near it was orange wrinkled and dry” (Kanafani, 1998, p. 58). The sarcastic dimension here comes from dramatic irony: the reader can connect the dots about illness, violence, exile, and loss, while the little boy remains partly unaware (Mir, 2013). The imagery is intensely vivid. The contrast between the weapon and the orange is especially powerful: the pistol suggests danger, death, and political violence, while the orange evokes life, home, and cultural identity. By placing them side by side, the author captures the clash between a lost innocence and the brutal realities surrounding the family. The repeated references to illness – both the father’s fever and the metaphorical “death” of the orange – reinforce the idea of a world in decline, poisoned by forces beyond the characters’ control. Here what is revealed is a deeply intricate portrayal of Palestinian identity, exile, and the collective trauma of displacement. Kanafani’s narrative, with its poignant and deliberate use of symbolism, captures not only the personal anguish of the characters but also the broader, more profound implications of political and social upheaval on a national scale. The metaphor of the orange, central to the narrative, encapsulates the loss of innocence, the rupture of familial bonds, and the severing of ties to the homeland, all of which are emblematic of the Palestinian experience of diaspora.

4. Conclusions

The study has illustrated how Kanafani masterfully intertwines the personal with the political, creating a narrative that transcends the individual to reflect the collective consciousness of a people grappling with the dislocation of their identity. The story, while rooted in specific historical and cultural contexts, offers a universal commentary on the human condition, particularly the existential crises faced by those who have been forcibly displaced. Kanafani’s depiction of these themes elevates his narrative beyond mere storytelling, positioning it as a critical text within the broader discourse on diaspora, memory, and identity. After in-depth analysis, it becomes evident that “The Land of Sad Oranges” is not just a reflection of the pain and suffering experienced by Palestinians but also a profound meditation on the enduring struggle for belonging in the face of loss and dislocation. Kanafani’s work serves as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit amidst the devastation of exile, offering a nuanced and layered understanding of the complexities inherent in the Palestinian diaspora.

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