

❖ representative realism – a literary trend which demands that the story reject a realistic method of presentation and to present collective and ethic concepts symbolising its universal essence²⁴. A representative of this trend is Badr 'Abd al-Haqq²⁵ in a short story entitled *Aḥzān al-nawm wa al-istīqāz* (The Sadness of the Night and the Morning),

• symbolic stories – in this group the person worth distinguishing is Ġamāl Abū Ḥamdān²⁶, who refers to history, analyses and presents the reality of contemporary times. In his story entitled *yawm dafn al-malik al-Mundir bin Mā' as-Samā'* (The Day of the Funeral of the King *al-Mundir bin Mā' as-Samā'*) by transferring the action to the years of rule of the al-Manaḍir dynasty, he gives us a criticism of a morally rotten society.

This is a short presentation of the birth of the story in Jordan. It starts in the 1920s, when in the areas situated to the east of Jordan the art of print is born. First periodicals began to appear, which gave rise to small prose forms. After the birth of the contemporary story comes a time of its quick development which has lasted until today. The works are created by various writers in various literary conventions. A wider and more detailed description of this issue may become the topic for a later article.

²⁴ Ġabūr 'Abd an-Nūr, *Al-mu'ğām...*, p. 236.

²⁵ Badr 'Abd al-Haqq – born in 1945 in Jordan, he studied in Syria, worked as a journalist in many Arab countries, came back to Jordan in 1980 where he is still working as a journalist.

²⁶ Ġamāl Abū Ḥamdān, born in 1944, studied in Egypt, then studied law in Lebanon. After returning to Jordan he worked in radio. He was the co-organiser of the trade union of writers. In 1979 he received a prize for his books for children, primarily for *An-N'hr* (River).

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THE PROBLEM OF DEATH IN LONGER FORMS OF GHASSAĀN KANAFĀNĪ'S PROSE

Ghassaān Kanafānī is a Palestinian writer who died tragically. The thought of death accompanied him inseparably since his childhood. On one hand it was connected with the fact that he lived in a time of war when he witnessed the sufferings of hundreds of thousands of his countrymen, who had to abandon their homes and seek shelter from bombs, just like him. However on the other hand, the awareness of the inevitability of premature death haunted him due to the fact that he was ill with an incurable disease – diabetes, which had been detected in early adolescence. He felt death close to him all the time. In one of his letters to his female friend, a Syrian writer Ghāda As-Sammān he wrote:

"Therefore what do I want? I don't know my dear, I don't know... Life is too complicated for people like me, who won't live to be forty. And the feeling I've got now, this awareness that we waste our life in vain..."¹

Kanafānī raised the problem of death in its different forms in many short stories, e.g. in the collection *Mawt sarīr raqam 12* ("The Death of Bed Number 12") and in the series of short stories entitled '*An ar-rijāl wa al-banādiq*' ("Of Men and Guns").

The writer looked into the problem of death more deeply and extensively in longer forms of writing, namely in novels and dramas. It is worth mentioning that he wrote two plays for the theatre, a radio play and eight novels, including three unfinished novels.

In the dramas and the radio play death was the fundamental domain of his philosophical search. In the play entitled *Al-Bāb* ("The Door"), the

¹ Ghāda As-Sammān, *Rasā'il Ghassān Kanafānī ilā Ġāda As-Sammān*, Beirut: Dār Aṭ-Ṭalī'a, 1999 (4-ed.). p. 92.

main characters' thoughts constantly touch the problem of death. Here is a fragment of a conversation of Shaddād and his mother:

"Shaddād: - (...) The idea has grown inside me like an olive tree grows(...)

Mother: - What idea?

Shaddād: - The idea that I will die...that I fight against Hubā [their God] and His voices in the desert (...) and that I will not stop until I plant my own Paradise on earth (...) either I will die or we will die together."²

Shaddād in opposition to his son Murthid chooses death. In the conversation with his son he states that life was imposed on humankind and nobody had asked them whether they want to come into this world.

"Shaddād: - (...) What choice is there for us?

Murthid: - Life - if we have to put it on the same scales pan as death.

Shaddād: - No! Death! Death! That's the only true choice left for us...accepting death, that's the real choice and it should be made at the right time, before you are forced to accept it in an ill-timed moment (...) It is the only choice we have to the last real freedom."³

With these words, Hubā addresses all who value life over death. He announces:

"Your life begins with life and ends in death, but my life begins with death and ends in birth."⁴

In the play *Al-Qubba'a wa an-nabī* ("The Hat and the Prophet") the heroes long for death and value it over life. The conversation between one of them (an accused person in court) and a creature from space deals with the phenomenon of death:

"The Accused: - And you? Don't you, anyone of you, long for death from time to time?

The Alien: - Death? It's an old wise word which disappeared from our vocabulary similar to the word 'pain'. Our distant ancestors remember it but we don't.

The Accused: But we do (...) You are really miserable!

The Alien: - Miserable? Because we don't feel pain and don't die?

The Accused: - Yes."⁵

² Ghassān Kanafānī, *Al-Āthār al-kāmila (al-masraḥiyyāt)*, Beirut: Dār Aṭ-Ṭalī'a, 1980 (2-ed.), p. 63.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 155-156.

Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, the author of the preface to a collection of Kanafānī's plays writes about the heroes' longing for death in the following way:

"The thought of death which haunts them is a fruit of the aggressive being, which in turn is confirmed through death."⁶

Life and death are two opposite poles. The heroes of the play feel ultimate contradiction of it and understand very well the fundamentals of this phenomenon.

"This lasting acute contrast, says Jabrā, between everyone who calls for death and everyone who calls for life. The Accused is aware of both these elements in himself and in others."⁷

The critic and writer interprets the contrasts existing inside death itself and presented through the hero of the play in the following way:

"Here the contradictory nature of death is revealed and is the main point of interest for the author. It attributes will with its meaning and despises false prophets who wear their 'prophecies' like hats on their heads, not being aware of their real sense, in the same way like the creature from space (It is a symbol of a prophecy in the shape of a hat)".⁸

In the radio play *Jisr ilā al-abad* ("The Bridge to Eternity"), the thought of death is omnipresent: in deeds, in speech, symbols and clues. The problem of death dominates the conversations between Rajā' and Fāris similarly like in the conversations between Shaddād and his Mother in *Al-Bāb* ("The Door"):

"Rajā': - You can't say anything else but about death?

Fāris: - No... It is my whole life (...)."⁹

However, the philosophical aspect of death is smaller than in other plays. It becomes a punishment for committed crimes and qualms of conscience are the main cause of the hero's longing for death.

Death is presented as a universal problem (Palestinian realities are not present), however, we can see the Palestinian realities where everything is soaked with death through the heroes' suffering and their way of perceiving the world. According to Jabrā, the opposition to death is the Palestinians' belief in life:

⁶ Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, *Hawājis an-naqīdayn fī masraḥiyyāt Ghassān Kanafānī*, The introduction to the book by Ghassān Kanafānī, *Al-Āthār al-kāmila (al-masraḥiyyāt)*, Beirut 1980 (2-ed.), p. 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, s. 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁹ Ghassān Kanafānī, *Al-Āthār al-kāmila (al-masraḥiyyāt)*, op. cit., pp. 238-239.

"Before the haunting thought of death - he wrote - death which riots in all their [heroes'] souls, there is always Palestinian negation of death, which many people cannot understand or believe in it...it is the belief in life since in this belief Palestinian character is fulfilled and there lies the ultimate victory."¹⁰

In Kanafānī's novels death is showed in many ways: as senseless and futile or noble and honourable, there is also the death of those who yielded to illusion.

The death of the heroes of the novel *Rijāl fī ash-shams* ("Men in the Sun") who died closed inside a hot tank is futile. Therefore the tragic ending of the novel raises a question: did they have to die in such a tragic way? According to the writer it had to finish like that since the people had chosen a wrong way of solving their problems. Escape to a foreign country will not solve them. The author suggests that the men should have sacrificed themselves for their country and not escape to an unfriendly foreign country. Douglas R. Magrath made an apt observation comparing the situation of the heroes of this novel with the fate of Muḥammad 'Alī Akbar in the short story *Mawt sarīr raqam 12* ("The Death of Bed Number 12"). He wrote:

"Both *Rijāl fī al-Shams* [*Rijāl fī ash-shams*] and *Mawt Sarīr Raqam Ithna'ashar* [*Mawt sarīr raqam 12*] strongly imply that pursuing a dream far from one's country can only lead to tragedy."¹¹

Some critics saw humiliation in the death of those people and the director of a film adaptation changed the ending completely*. A question arises: "What if it really happened?" Maybe Kanafānī during the six years spent in Kuwait heard the story from someone? Bilāl Al-Ḥasan, the writer's friend, confirmed that suggestion telling their friend Faḍl An-Naqīb:

"Did you know that the story described in *Rijāl fī ash-shams* ("Men in the Sun") really happened?"¹²

Having read a short story entitled "Shred of Thread" by Gue de Maupassant, Kanafānī expressed his dissatisfaction with the ending, in which the main character dies, although he loved the story. He said in a conversation with Faḍl An-Naqīb:

¹⁰ Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹¹ Douglas R. Magrath, *A Study of Rijāl fī Al-Shams by Ghassān Kanafānī*, "Journal of Arabic Literature", 10 (1979), p. 97.

*A characteristic change in the scenario of the film to the book was made by Tawfīq Ṣāliḥ in 1972 under the title *Al-Makhdū'ūn*.

¹² Faḍl An-Naqīb, *Hākaḍā tantahī al-qīṣaṣ, hākaḍā tabda'*, Mu'assasat Al-Abḥāth Al-'Arabiyya, Beirut 1983, p. 54.

"(...) my great estimation for G. de Maupassant, however the death of this Norman farmer in the ending wasn't necessary. It only increases the tragic nature of the farmer's fate which already is tragic enough."¹³

On another occasion when he talked about this story he was surprised with the question:

"And what if the story is based on a real event?" Initially he did not react continuing his discourse about the poetics of the "Shred of Thread". Suddenly he stopped as if the question had just reached him from the beyond, he repeated it aloud and it seemed that he silently doubted the thesis he had propagated before."¹⁴

The authenticity of the fates of Maupassant and Kanafānī's heroes can be an excuse for the tragic endings of those stories since they were written from life itself. It occurs also nowadays that illegal emigrants die in a similar way, suffocating to death in tightly closed truck containers. In the novel *Rijāl fī ash-shams* ("Men in the Sun") not only the men who died can be blamed for their death but also those who did not want to hear their knocking. Faḍl An-Naqīb says:

"Undoubtedly the three men were knocking on the walls of the tank, cried, asked for help and did everything they could to keep themselves alive. Every man who wants to live would do the same. They died not because they had not knocked on the walls of the tank, but because there was nobody who would like to hear them and even if there had been somebody to hear them they would not have lifted a finger to save them."¹⁵

We do not know if the three men were knocking or not, but undoubtedly they did not want to die. Here we have to contradict Douglas R. Magrath who said that Shaddād chooses death (hero of the play "The Door") and the three men were similar. He wrote:

"Likewise Abū Qais, As'ad and Marwān choose death when they fail to bang on the sides of the tank, an action that may result in their escape and the beginning of their long imprisonment for being illegal aliens. Therefore they choose death."¹⁶

Shaddād chooses death since he knows that challenging his god Hubā he has no chance of staying alive. However our three heroes did not challenge anyone to fight, they just wanted to earn a living. That was the defeat in the

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁶ Douglas R. Magrath, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

war of 1948 (An-Nakba) which lead them to the tragic ending. Magrath says:

"The tragedy that occurs in *Rijāl fī al-Shams* [*Rijāl fī ash-shams*] represents the larger disaster - *al-Nakba*- [An-Nakba] which has befallen the Palestinian people."¹⁷

He also quotes Riyād Najīb Ar-Rayyis's opinion, who sees the fate of all Palestine in the fate of the heroes of the novel *Rijāl fī ash-shams* ("Men in the Sun"): "The fate of Palestine is the fate they met. They suffocated from the wait."¹⁸

In the same novel the author also shows honourable death. The teacher Salīm dies in such a way. He dies with a rifle in his hand defending his village against aggression. He is an embodiment of the values and rules which are still vivid in the memory of the Palestinian people.

In the novel *Mā tabaqqā lakum* ("What is Left for You") the death of the traitor Zakariyyā is dishonourable. When he exhorts his wife to abortion, she stabs him in his genitals in defense of the baby inside her. Such death does not raise sorrow or sympathy; a wife takes revenge on her husband's cruelty, frees herself from his power and tyranny. His death turns out to be as unimportant as his life, and as low and mean as his deeds. On the next pages of the novel the author gives us clues that soon Ḥāmid will deal a stab and an Israeli soldier will die. It will be an execution of a righteous sentence on the occupier oppressing the Palestinian people.

Salīm was executed by firing squad after Zakariyyā had given him away to the Israeli soldiers in the war of 1956. He went to meet his death without a shadow of fear, with pride and dignity:

"His face suddenly and without hesitation became serious, proud and stony, characteristic for those who know that they will die soon in the square before the very eyes of people who have gathered there. Will die for the things everybody respects and esteems."¹⁹

Such death becomes an example, a symbol of heroism and sacrifice. We can see it most clearly when Maryam tries to console Ḥāmid by saying that his enemies will not find him. The hero, however, feels humiliated by her words because like Salīm he is not afraid of death.

"Probably she [Maryam] wanted to comfort me - he thinks aloud- but she didn't realize that instead she humiliated me. Why should they kill

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

¹⁹ Ghassān Kanafānī, *Al-Āthār al-kāmila (Ar-Riwāyāt)*, Beirut: Dār Aṭ-Ṭalī'a, 1980 (2-ed.), pp. 200-201.

you? You are an unimportant mortal man who lives like an ordinary average man and will die in the same way."²⁰

Death acquires a completely different aspect in the novel *Al-A'mā wa al-aṭraṣh* ("The Blind and the Deaf"). The image of the Holy man dies in the heroes' thoughts and the Holy man himself, unlike other people, dies for them again. For those who believe in him he is a hope of salvation in case of an incurable illness or other misfortunes. His death in their minds of the Blind man and the Deaf man tears down the wall of illusion; they find out the truth and they debunk him. The Holy man dies in silence, without a word or sorrow since such was the will of the heroes.

"And when we went there, we killed you and buried you again, without light or noise, in silence because you deserved this."²¹

However, throwing the Holy man from their system of values requires enormous determination from those people; now they will not have his support, they may count only on themselves when struggling with fate.

"Things get complicated when Holy men die, the bridges of illusion break down and promises disappear, and you have to face the adversities of fate."²²

The heroes are willing to understand that their problems must be solved by themselves: "Yes, things get complicated, but it was inevitable."²³

On the other hand the death of sheik Ḥasanayn who joined a group of mujaheddins (soldiers of the holy war 'jihad') and was killed in action is shown in a positive way. His body was never found as he went to far beyond enemy line. In the Deaf man's memory he is still alive and influences his thoughts:

"I mentioned sheik Ḥasanayn because when he died I had almost the same feeling I have now. I felt a horrible void which pushes a man to the edge of cowardly decisions."²⁴

Another Palestinian patriot, Badr Al-Lubada from the novel *Ā'id ilā Ḥayfā* ("Returning to Haifa"), who was killed in the war of 1948 is also similar to sheik Ḥasanayn. His portrait hangs on a wall in a house on the territory occupied by the Jews, becoming a symbol of courage of those who lived under occupation. Critic Fārūq Wādī noticed aptly:

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 201-202.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 523.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 523.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 523.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 529.

"He [portrait] is a bridge connecting past and present, between a Palestinian who remained on his land and his countryman in exile."²⁵

In the novel *Barqūq naysān* ("April Anemones") the writer emphasizes the beauty of a noble death as an opposition to slothful life under occupation. Karīm died fighting for his country. In this fact there is as if some joy next to sorrow. In the novel it is written:

"(...)there was sorrow, inside it remained joy just like pain is hidden inside joy. And Karīm died a year ago, buried in an unknown place, without a name...he seems so distant now as if for all those years he was one of the great dreams which inseparably accompany man forever."²⁶

Death in the novel *Ash-Shay' al-ākhar - man qatala Laylā Al-Ḥāyik?* ("Another Case – Who killed Layla Al-Hayek?") is presented in a different way. The mistress of the main hero and at the same time his wife's friend is murdered. He is accused of the murder and sentenced to death, though he is innocent and able to prove it. However, he prefers to die than to hurt his family by revealing the truth about his adultery. Such behaviour makes the reader think about the sense of human life, existing traditions and rules. It also obliges to fathom the essence of things and not be satisfied with appearances. Ṣāliḥ's death is not simple in the same way as life is not simple. He says:

"Who of us does not watch over one's life (...) but it is too complicated to deal with it in a simple matter...the most difficult for man is that they can imagine the senselessness of their own death..."²⁷

Critic Muṣṭafā Al-Walī dealing with this problem wrote:

"For his hero Ghassān chooses life devoted to others and deliberate death devoted to two things at the same time; to truth and other people. Salid does it, accepting the death penalty, to which he is sentenced by the court, because he wants to give a sentence of life based on truth. He presents it in his letters to his wife."²⁸

We believe, unlike Muṣṭafā Al-Walī, that Ṣāliḥ's death is inexplicable. It hurt his wife and children more than the truth of adultery could do.

Dealing with different contradictory aspects of death and detecting people in various tragic circumstances Ghassān Kanafānī made it clear that in times of great tragedies death may sometimes be the only solution. A solution, it seems necessary to say which is not always the right one from the point of view of other people.

²⁵ Fārūq Wādī, *Thalāth 'alāmāt fī ar-riwāya al-filastīniyya: Ghassān Kanafānī, Imīl Ḥabībī, Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, Al-Mu'assasa Al-'Arabiyya li-d-Dirāsāt wa an-Nashr*, Beirut 1981, p. 67.

²⁶ Ghassān Kanafānī, *Al-Āthār al-kāmila (Ar-Riwāyāt)*, op. cit., pp. 581-582.

²⁷ Ghassān Kanafānī, *Ash-Shay' al-ākhar - man qatala Laylā Al-Ḥāyik?*, Mu'assasat Al-Abḥāth Al-'Arabiyya, Beirut 1987 (3-ed.), pp. 117-118.

²⁸ Muṣṭafā Al-Walī, Ghassān Kanafānī. *Takāmūl ash-shakhṣiyya wa ikhtizālūhā: Dirāsa naqdiyya fī jawānib min adabihi wa rasā'ilīhi*, Damascus: Dār Al-Ḥaṣād, 1993. p. 95.