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THE CYRUS LEGEND
IN THE ŠĀHNĀME

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Władysław Dulęba (1920-1987) was an Oriental scholar and certainly one of the best connoisseurs of Iranian poetry in this century, a talented translator and experienced editor. In his dissertation he discusses the question of whether and in which part Persian tales about Cyrus the Great, known already to Herodotus, Ctesias, and other ancient authors, influenced Iranian epic writings. The most beautiful expression of this influence can be found in Firdousi's *Šāhnāme*.

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TO LIVE IN EXILE IN THE WORLD OF ILLUSIONS
(The alienated hero in the early stories of Ghassān Kanafānī)

Ghassān Kanafānī, one of the most eminent of contemporary Palestinian writers, shows in the majority of his work the image of the defeat of Palestinian man escaping from the hellish reality allocated him. He depicts his alienation and escape into an illusion which gives him a sense of psychological stability along with a feeling of material security. For there are for that times when the Palestinian is no longer the actively operating subject yet rather is treated as objectively the object controlled by the external world. This problem is most clearly expressed in the novels *Rijāl fī al-shams* (Men in the Sun) and *Al-a'amā wa al-a'raṣh* (The Blind and the Deaf), published in 1963 and 1968 respectively.

The novel "Men in the Sun" is a work written fifteen years after the Palestinians were forced to leave their homeland. It is one of the best works in contemporary Arab literature. It presents the fate of refugees living in startling alienation in exile, refugees who had hoped for a better life far from their occupied homeland. Of their hopes there remains only the cries for salvation which nobody hears. There remain merely the dead bodies strewn on the desert rubbish heap.

The isolation, which leaves man helpless, leads to the loss of his features and behaviour. At the same time human abilities remain independent of will; they are unable to find themselves in the hideous realities of the camps where hundreds of thousands of refugees are forced to live in the illusionary hope of a quick return to their homes in the country lost. The heroes of the story: Abū Qays, As'ad and Marwān decide to change their existence, to end this debilitating way of life – where purpose lies solely in securing food for the family. They escape therefore to Kuwait. This escape of theirs involves a long, difficult journey through the desert. As they

cannot legally emigrate they turn to smugglers for help, however, during this journey to a brighter tomorrow the majority of these poor, exhausted people fail to reach their goal, dying in the desert. Just such a fate meets the heroes. In the course of an extended wait in the scorching desert sun to cross the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border, hidden in tanks, they suffocate and their bodies are thrown onto a rubbish heap.

Abū Al-Khayzarān – their guide, whose life paths personify the fate of Palestinian leaders, turns out to be helpless. Deprived by the war of everything, even his “masculinity”, having discovered the bodies of the men in the tank he raises the question “Why didn’t you knock?” It being the same question the desert asks the dead men.

With this tragic ending Kanafānī depicts with unusual poignancy the helplessness and languor of the alienated Palestinian nation. He, as Hilary Kilpatrick has written, “employed, to increasing effect, powerful images and symbols and bitter irony to convey his perception of the betrayal that the Palestinians had suffered, their own weakness and their unwillingness to revolt against injustice and take responsibility for their future.”¹ The author makes the reader aware that the route chosen by these people is a mistaken one, will bring them disillusionment, and as a consequence death. Only the severing of illusion and the undertaking of concrete action, close to the homeland, is able to return the desire to act and direct one’s very self.

In reading this novel we are to examine its contents as allegory, which was Kanafānī’s intention. The author himself said “If this novel does not convey to the reader its allegorical sense then I have failed.”² We believe however that Abū Al-Khayzarān is the reflection of the Arab, Palestinian leadership which was unable to defend its country and lived with the false hope of crushing the enemy and liberating the homeland. The critic Raḍwā ‘Āshūr has interpreted the personage of Abū Al-Khayzarān in the following way: “He is either a symbol of the leadership of the Palestinian nation which ineffectively played out its role in the Palestinian war, or equally the symbol of the Arab kings and presidents who participated in it.”³

¹ Hilary Kilpatrick, *Encyclopaedia of Arabic Literature*, London, New York 1998, p. 426.

² Iḥsān ‘Abbās, *Al-mabnā ar-ramzī fī qīṣaṣ Ghassān Kanafānī*, The Introduction to the book by Ghassān Kanafānī, *Al-Athār al-kāmila*, Beirut 1972, p. 16.

³ Raḍwā ‘Āshūr, *At-ṭarīq ilā al-khayma al-ukhrā*, Beirut 1977, pp. 69-70.

Abū Al-Khayzarān for ten years has been unable to come to terms with this tragedy and accept his disability. The attempts of doctors came to nothing, the persuasiveness of friends that the explosion that left him crippled and removed the possibility of having a wife and children was nothing in comparison with the fact that he could have died. In the novel we read: “Did he not accept it, was there not enough strength to finally come to terms with reality.”⁴ Actually he was unable to accept that he was no longer a total man. “Even while still not totally treated he rashly fled the hospital as if the flight could return him to the state prior to the explosion.”⁵ Abu Al-Khayzarān inhabits a fictitious world, still feeling the pain which physically a long time ago waned, yet always returns when somebody accidentally raises the delicate subject for him of family and children. Asked “why have you still not married? He suffers as if he still lay on the operating table.”⁶

The three heroes of the novel believed in their guide Abū Al-Khayzarān who was to take them to a better life, believed like Palestinians believed in the unrealisable promises of their leaders. Abū Qays, an old man, who has to maintain a large family, dreams of the building of “at least one room in some town.”⁷ Thrown off his land, unable to do anything, merely wait for the return to his ancestral home. For him there is no difference between life and death. He says to himself: “You will die? Who said that death is not better than life at present? For ten years you have waited with the hope that you’ll return to the ten olive trees you cultivated in the village.”⁸ But the word of hope dies in the journey of illusions; black reality penetrates his illusions and dreams. Abū Qays surrenders himself to the dreams of life in the shade of the olive trees, who sees with the eyes of his soul the tree-lined Kuwaiti streets full of people and children’s laughter, and paradoxically comes to die in the Kuwaiti desert, devoid of trees and people: “The trees are only in your head Abū Qays, ten great trees which would give you every spring a lot of good fruit (...) there are no trees in Kuwait.”⁹

⁴ Ghassān Kanafānī, *Al-Athār al-kāmila*, Beirut 1972, p. 110.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 110.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 110.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 48.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 48.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 48.

In the work the image of the lost Palestinian land is constantly present, at times becoming sharp, though more often viewed in the background. Abū Qays says: "This is the voice of your heart, listen to it pressing your breast to the ground, it will come victorious over the difficult route to the light."¹⁰ Unfortunately this route leads to hell.

Abū Qays knows that there "it cannot rain here, there is only dust and heat, you've forgotten where you are, you've forgotten..."¹¹ He realizes that this is not his homeland, that he is far away on a foreign, hostile soil.

The second of those who escape As'ad, is unable to decide about himself, for already at birth his parents decided his future for him, even choosing a wife, his cousin Nadā. "Who said that he wants to marry Nadā? Is he only to marry her because his father and his brother (Nadā's father) decided so on the day of their births. His uncle, because they were born on the same day, sees in this destiny, and refuses a hundred bachelors keen on the hand of his daughter."¹² Unfortunately the still predominant stereotype that the most profitable is to marry one's cousins means that this along with other customs cause people in Arab society to be lost and alienated. They cannot and are unable to oppose this; having to accept although they do not want to and do not understand why.

As'ad's uncle, the father of his future wife, gives him 50 dinars for the trip to Kuwait, so that he can find some work and earn money for the wedding. As'ad no longer feels a person but a thing which can be bought, "he wants to buy him for his daughter like a bag of cow manure."¹³ "He felt degradation which started to well up in his throat, he wanted to throw those 50 dinars back in his uncle's face."¹⁴ But this he didn't do.

The third of the travellers, Marwān, has to keep his mother and three brothers and sisters. Because of which he breaks off his studies and gets a job. To add to all the trouble his elder brother, living in Kuwait, suddenly stops sending money, so the father abandons the family and marries somebody lame yet with their own house and savings. Marwān feels that

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 37.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 37.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 61.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 61.

he, his father and even his father's second wife, crippled in the bombing, are victims of war.

In the fates that befall these four novel characters an important role is played by the desert which turns out to be the reflection of death and hell. As Fārūq Wādī has said: "There, and in those times, the desert was the bridge connecting illusion ... And three men arrive over that bridge in the direction of unavoidable death."¹⁵ The sun is here a killer, though for the majority of us it is associated with freedom and life. Kanafānī himself asks in doubt: "But could the sun kill them (the heroes of the novel "Men in the Sun")? Could it kill in their hearts the source of hopes and desires?"¹⁶ The sun appears therefore as a part of their illusions which lead them to take the wrong route.

The writer shows how cruel the Palestinians' fate is, nonetheless, however, we see at times that destiny can change. As'ad's death paradoxically stops what was unstoppable: the wedding will not take place. Destiny that in this novel can be overturned only through the hero's death, in the next of the author's works takes on the features of reversibility. Other characters arrive, people of the new Palestinian time. Imīl Habībī, the eminent Palestinian novelist and journalist living in Israel, has defined the evolution of Kanafānī's heroes as: "Kanafānī had to experience along with his fellow countrymen the happenings of ten years abroad in order to understand that he had to knock loudly on the tanker walls, for otherwise nobody will hear, and he'll suffocate from the heat and die."¹⁷

In the short and unfinished novel *Al-a'amā wa al-aṭrash* published after Kanafānī's death (1972) there is raised a new, different aspect of alienation. The author presents two unusual individuals: the blind 'Āmir and the deaf Abū Qays. Both live in the world of illusion, searching for salvation from their incurable illnesses. They unexpectedly find out about the grave of a holy man with miraculous healing powers. When they reach the place of miracles it turns out that the holy effigy on the tree next to the grave is simply fungus, while the rumours spread about the healing properties are

¹⁵ Fārūq Wādī, *Thalāth 'alāmāt fī ar-riwāya al-Filistīniyya*. Beirut 1981, p. 57.

¹⁶ Ghassān Kanafānī, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

¹⁷ Imīl Habībī, (Interview) "Al-Yawm al-Sābiī" [weekly magazine], No. 119, 18. 08. 1986.

merely untrue. After several days thinking over the whole situation they decide to destroy the grave and tree. But despite their great desire to destroy they find themselves unable to realize their intentions.

In this work Kanafānī uses the motifs of fetishism as an important aspect of alienation, where relationships between people are compared to the relations of people to things. People are not able to do what they want, despite the fact they consider that they should do something. They are under the influence of metaphysical forces which overcoming their consciousness make them incapable of action. It so turned out that in Arab society escape to a spiritual saviour, existing in an extraterrestrial world became a phenomenon, that this phenomenon appears in the moments of tragic defeats. In Kanafānī it appears in the form of the holy man's grave; when usual ways of salvation do not work people escape to supernatural powers in which to seek salvation.

This same element is used by another Palestinian writer Imīl Habībī. In his novel *Al-Waqā'i' al-gharība fī ikhtifā' Sa'id Abī An-Naḥs al-Mutashā'il* (The Unusual Circumstances Surrounding the Disappearance of a Certain Said Abu An-Nahsa from the House of Optimists) here the phenomenal force is a character from Space who says openly: "This is your problem when you can no longer stand your pitiful situation; while at the same time you can't afford to pay the price to change it; escape to me."¹⁸

In a similar way the blind and the deaf, knowing that the grave that arouse in people false hope should be destroyed, do nothing. They are unable to depart consciously from beyond the consciousness of their society. The critic Fārūq Wādī well described the consciousness of the blind and the deaf in his book *Thalāth 'Alāmāt fī al-Riwāya al-Filistīniyya* (Three Aspects of the Palestinian Story): "They decided to destroy the grave yet feeling helpless they were unable to do so, even though they felt the need for change. The distribution of social consciousness, its falsification does not allow the certainty of change, society requires foremostly the search for a route to its own consciousness."¹⁹ While the symbol of "one's own"

¹⁸ Imīl Habībī, *Al-Waqā'i' al-gharība fī ikhtifā' Sa'id Abī an-Naḥs al-mutashā'il*, Beirut 1980, p. 90.

¹⁹ Fārūq Wādī, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

consciousness is the Palestinian partisan, who represents the Palestinian revolution started in 1965.

Kanafānī's works are inseparably linked to the time of their creation. In the first of these the author does not give us a recipe for fighting with torpor and isolation, he does not lead us to the route of change, there is no positive hero, no fighting revolutionary, in them.

In Kanafānī's subsequent works, written after the Palestinian resistance movement had started their actions, there appears a hero who changes the way of Palestinian thinking. It is not for no reason that literary critics called the author the writer who has eradicated the image of the helpless Palestinian refugee, placing there instead a Palestinian fighting for his homeland. Hilary Kilpatrick writes about Kanafānī as follows: "He was the first of the new generation of Palestinian writers who, not content with depicting the tragedy of the refugees, sought to foster national consciousness and explore paths of liberation for these people."²⁰

And so gradually disappeared the world of illusion and bitter alienation.

²⁰ Hilary Kilpatrick, *op. cit.*, p. 426.