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Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s

Refqa Abu-Remaileh: The Afterlives of Iltizām: Emile Habibi through a Kanafaniesque Lens of Resistance Literature

eISBN: 978-3-95490-613-0

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The Afterlives of *Iltizām*: 
Emile Habibi through a Kanafaniesque Lens of Resistance Literature

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Two of the most well-known Palestinian writers never met. Emile Habibi (Imīl Ḥabībī) (1922–1996) and Ghassan Kanafani (Ghassān Kanafānī) (1936–1972)1 had a virtual meeting of sorts—a meeting in print, in the 1960s. Habibi was living ‘inside’ in Haifa under Israeli occupation, and Kanafani ‘outside,’ a stateless refugee floating in the diaspora. Across borders and restrictions, a silent dialogue was brewing, but any hopes of further encounters, whether real or virtual, were cut short by Kanafani’s tragic assassination at the hands of the Israeli Mossad in Beirut in 1972. As redemption perhaps we know that the debate continued to simmer posthumously. We know this not because Habibi lived on or directly addressed Kanafani, but rather because we know it followed Habibi to his own grave. His final, and only, words on the matter were engraved on his tombstone in 1996: “I stayed in Haifa.” Habibi, the “all-sarcastic enchanter,” as Mahmoud Darwish (Maḥmūd Darwīsh) named him in the obituary of the same title (Darwīsh, „Emile Habiby“ 95), was with one stroke of a sentence asserting a Palestinian presence to transcend his own, and also simultaneously responding and challenging Kanafani’s novella *Return to Haifa* (1970).2

Some of the most poignant literary exchanges in Palestinian literature have revolved around in/outside dialectics. The more silent Habibi/Kanafani duel, according to Elias Khoury (Ilyās Khūrī), was one of the main reasons behind Habibi embarking on writing his satirical masterpiece novel, *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*, published in 1974. I will touch on the in/outside debate later in the paper, but first, I will turn to the literary moment that brought Habibi and Kanafani together. That moment revolved around the publication of Kanafani’s studies on Palestinian literature in the late 1960s. Although he is best known as a prolific writer of short stories and novellas, such as *Return to Haifa*, *Men in the Sun* (1962), and *All That’s Left to You* (1966), Kanafani was also a critic, historian, journalist and theorist of the Palestinian resistance. His diverse repertoire included two landmark works on what he called *adab al-muqāwama* (resistance literature). His first study, “Adab al-muqāwama fī Filaṣṭīn al-muḫṭalla” (“Resistance Literature in Occupied Palestine”), published in 1966, took the Arab world by storm. It introduced the works of the then unknown “poets of resistance”: Mahmoud Darwish, Samih al-Qasim (Ṣāmiḥ al-Qāsim) and Tawfīq Zayyad (Tawfīq Zayyād). Resistance literature was a new and valuable contribution to the glossary of *iltizām* (political and literary commitment) at the height of a period of revolutionary fervor and anticolonial struggles. Critics rallied around those newly discovered voices and agreed with Kanafani that they were the shining example of true *iltizām* and a model for every writer in the Arab world (Klemm 57).

It was in the second volume, *Al-adab al-filaṣṭīnī al-muqāwim taht al-ḥīṭilāl 1948–1968* (*Palestinian Literature of Resistance under Occupation*), published in 1968, that Kanafani includes a short story by a certain Abu Salam in the anthology section. Abu Salam was in fact Emile Habibi’s folksier pen name in his early literary days. Habibi was indeed the father of a son he named Salam (peace) so that he can be known as the ‘father of peace,’ as he
Refqa Abu-Remaileh explains in *Saraya, the Ogre’s Daughter: A Palestinian Fairy Tale* (83). It was perhaps also a way to distinguish his fictional literary writing from his well-known persona as a public figure, leader, politician, editor and journalist. As the only short story included in the predominantly poetic anthology of resistance literature, it is clear that Kanafani had a sharp eye for spotting the emerging aesthetic force behind a unique blend of irony, satire, humor and tragedy that Habibi would later become famous for. I will turn to look at Kanafani’s studies in more depth. This is part of a broader research initiative to explore key Palestinian critical and theoretical contributions, not as peripheral theoretical frames, but rather as rigorous critiques of their own society and contexts. In this spirit, I will read Habibi’s works through Kanafani’s lens of resistance literature.

**Kanafani’s Resistance Literature**

The rallying reception of Kanafani’s work was in many ways telling of a collective sense of guilt. The world, and the Arab world in particular, had turned a blind eye to those forgotten Palestinians who remained in their towns and villages after the 1948 Nakba. They found themselves confined under military occupation in the new state of Israel, becoming strangers and refugees in their own homeland. At worse, they were seen as collaborators or traitors. Kanafani’s studies twisted the arm of such clichés: not only did he shed new light on the young voices emerging from under occupation, he also held them up as the essence and heart of the Palestinian struggle.

In 1966, Kanafani was writing at the height of a global revolutionary moment. His second study, however, was published one year after the devastating defeat of the 1967 war. The defeat shook to the core strongly held ideals in the Arab world, and instigated a loss of faith in the role of the politically committed writer. Despite the collective disillusionment that cast a dark shadow across the region, Kanafani’s second study reasserted the role of literature and cultural resistance as part and parcel of the armed struggle, an idea that was gaining more ground amongst Palestinians in the diaspora. Although *iltizām* was fizzling out elsewhere in the Arab world, it was growing new roots in the Palestinian context through its offshoot resistance literature, a strand of “al-adab al-thawrī” (revolutionary literature) (Klemm 57) that was developing before 1967, but which went on to have a longer life through Kanafani’s works.

Kanafani’s studies are, on the one hand, a product of a Palestinian revolutionary moment that recognized the importance of literature and the arts in serving the cause. On the other hand, they also reveal a unique ability to transcend Kanafani’s own context and look beyond. In the late 1960s, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) set up various art and film units, and so did other factions, for example the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), of which Kanafani was a member and a spokesperson. A 1982 PLO poster—the product of the plastic arts unit—quoting the leader of Fatah, Yasser Arafat, captures the idea of an all-encompassing revolution: “This revolution is not merely a gun, but also a scalpel of a surgeon, a brush of an artist, a pen of a writer, a plough of a farmer, an axe of a worker.” But, Kanafani’s own vision of resistance reached beyond that of the *fidāʾī* soldier-poet analogy. It turned its attention, even amidst a surging armed struggle, away from the battlefields to the relative quiet of the occupied ‘inside’ where Kanafani located the heart of the resistance. Going against the grain of the time, his definition of a literature of resistance assigned value to the indirect and obtuse: aesthetics, humor, satire and folk wisdom. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the questions raised and issues de-
bated in Kanafani’s studies, more than forty years on, continue to be relevant, and in some cases, still unresolved today. The seeds of cultural resistance that Kanafani planted set Palestinian literature, for better or for worse, on a new path of self-awareness, one that continues to struggle with or against a notion of resistance.

On *Iltizām* in Occupied Palestine

As well as acting as anthologies of literary works which would not have been available to an Arab audience at the time, Kanafani’s studies are also aimed at raising awareness. Much of the writing is informative, given the embarrassingly little knowledge an Arab audience would have had at the time of the situation of Palestinians who had remained in their homeland in 1948. Kanafani documents the existence, conditions and literary production of those Palestinians *taḥt al-hiṣār* (under siege). There are statistics, examples and anecdotes to illustrate the picture he was painting of Palestinians under siege. In *Al-adab al-filasṭīnī al-muqāwim*, Kanafani draws on the philosophy of *ṣumūd* (steadfastness) (25) and relays the gravity of the battle the Palestinian population living under occupation are waging. A clear sense of urgency underlines Kanafani’s words in *Al-adab al-filasṭīnī al-muqāwim* as he outlines Israeli policies, through discrimination and martial law, towards the psychological, political, economic, cultural and physical annihilation of a people and their history in the name of so-called ‘security’ (38).

One of the early features of resistance literature, which endows it with a special status according to *Al-adab al-filasṭīnī al-muqāwim*, is an “early awareness” (54) of political and literary commitment. Unlike their Arab counterparts, Kanafani writes, the question of *iltizām* was not a subject of debate amongst Palestinian intellectuals living under occupation (39). Rather, it evolved naturally in circumstances of heightened urgency:

Daily Israeli challenges required literature to develop quickly, shortening the ‘childhood’ phase, which the contemporary Arab literary movements had spent in a long debate about the extent to which art can be committed, and whether committed art can be creative. The weight of the Israeli oppression itself gave a quick solution to this debate. In other words: The question of committed literature was not a subject of debate amongst the vast majority of Palestinian intellectuals. Debate was seen as a luxury that no one could afford. (ibid. 39)

As Kanafani described it in *Al-adab al-filasṭīnī al-muqāwim*, a ‘conscious resistor’ or ‘conscious *iltizām*’ (*al-muqāwim al-wāʾī ḏal-iltizām al-wāʾī*) had developed of its own accord in occupied Palestine. He suggests that unlike elsewhere in the Arab world, resistance poetry did not begin by demeaning the value of the word in the difficult battle it was waging, but rather recognized its role, cherished it and considered it essential and indispensable (65). Kanafani thus asserts that the role of resistance in occupied Palestine is one of combatting Israeli narratives of hegemony, cooptation and accusations of backwardness, which he saw as more potent forms of oppression than arms and violence (43). This was the background which prompted the development of a *ḥaraka adabiyya multazima* (a committed literary movement), “one of the best resistance literatures in contemporary history” (41). Kanafani writes, and one that is “distinctive for its deep vision and early understanding of elements that Arab intellectuals only realized later, especially after the 1967 war” (54).
Prose Resistance?

Kanafani based his analysis of resistance primarily on the works of what became known as the trinity of young poets from occupied Palestine (Darwish, al-Qasim and Zayyad). Although poetry maintained its dominant status, prose writing developed beyond Kanafani’s conception of it—especially evident in Habibi’s career—and even introduced new elements to the debate. As a prose writer himself, Kanafani was not demeaning the role of narrative fiction in resistance. Rather, he was highlighting a context whereby censorship and threat of arrest made the transmission of prose more difficult. Poetry, according to Kanafani’s 1966 study “Adab al-muqāwama fī filasṭīn al-muḥṭalla,” was at the time mainly circulated in villages, at local festivals and through memorization (47). The development of a symbolic style in the poetry, he notes, helped defy the censor. The need to rely more on the aesthetic, the obtuse, the indirect rather than the political, made for a much more active and participatory reception experience. “People understood,” Kanafani writes in his 1968 study, “that they have to decode meanings themselves” (39).

On the other hand, the short story, argues Kanafani, suffered from too many artistic shortcomings. Narratives were too preoccupied with social situations, Kanafani explains in his 1968 study, and an inability to reach the aesthetic depths of poetry to be considered resistance literature (63–64). He does make the point, however, that this is not because poetry is the better entrenched form of art, but is also due to difficulties in publication and distribution of longer prose works under military rule (ibid.). On the future development of prose writings, Kanafani predicted quite rightly in his 1966 study, that with the splitting of the Israeli Communist party in 1965 into Arab and Jewish factions, the party’s Arabic newspaper al-Ittihād would become an important outlet for emerging Arab writers (57). In fact, al-Jadīd, the literary supplement of al-Ittihād was precisely the venue through which Habibi’s short stories were initially published and later his novel, The Pessoptimist, was serialized before it was released as a book in 1974. In the Palestinian context, the concept of resistance has evolved into an overarching frame that extends beyond poetry. Beyond Kanafani’s seminal works, it remains an understudied, albeit widespread phenomenon. It is worthwhile to build on and expand Kanafani’s conception of the notion of resistance to other genres and media. Beginning with Kanafani’s own point of departure for prose genres—Habibi’s short story—I will highlight how Habibi’s works surpass, further nuance, enrich and challenge the concept of resistance literature.

Resistance on Two Fronts

In his 1966 study, Kanafani described resistance literature in occupied Palestine as fighting on two fronts: The front of raising awareness of the oppressive conditions under occupation, and that of subverting Zionist myths, claims and accusations (127). No other people are simultaneously so well acquainted and so victimized by Zionist policies as the Palestinians who remained in what became Israel after the 1948 Nakba. While raising awareness was not a task they had self-consciously taken on in the early days, it became the outcome of a struggle with what it means to be Palestinian in the face of daily oppression. Their daily clash with Zionism was what endowed them with their unique position according to Kanafani. This daily resistance was not fought sporadically on battlefields and was not a premeditated ideology. It was rather an existential, psychological and physical clash with an ideology that aimed to erase Palestinian presence from the land. The absurd condition of
being present in but absented from one’s homeland formed an important backdrop to the
works of Habibi and others. Although Kanafani was among the first to draw attention to the
idea of daily resistance beyond armed struggle, its permutations are often under-explored in
analyses of Palestinian literature in Israel.

In this sense, Kanafani was pioneering in the keen attention he paid to the impact of Zi-
onist propaganda and its creation of narrative. As well as writing a separate volume devoted
to Zionist literature entitled *Fi-l-adab al-sahyūnīt* (*On Zionist Literature*) (1967), in his 1966
study he includes a section that examines Arab characters in Zionist novels. Through his
own research, Kanafani finds that Zionist literature has questions but no clear answers. In
other words, the further away Zionist ideals are exposed to be from reality, elaborates
Kanafani in his 1966 study, the more difficult it becomes to complete the story (117, 125).
In contrast, Kanafani asserts that resistance literature “does not ask questions but knows the
way” (125).

Looking back to that period, Mahmoud Darwish writes in his introduction to Kanafani’s
complete works that Kanafani not only lifted the veil of secrecy over what was being writ-
ten in occupied Palestine, but he also “studied the opposite of this literature and a source of
its dialogue” (“Ghazāl” 22). By analyzing Zionist writing and its role in the formation of
the Zionist entity and consciousness, Darwish continues, Kanafani “highlighted the destruc-
tive role of Zionist culture” (22) and the way it was used to brainwash Palestinian students
(23). Therefore, at the heart of resistance literature lies a ‘dialogue with its opposite’ and the
real battle, according to Kanafani, as set out in his 1966 study, is in “facing another litera-
ture that tries to overshadow and obscure the Palestinian narrative” (91).

**Literary Resistance in Abu Salam**

In his works, Habibi takes on many of the tenets that Kanafani highlights as the essence of
resistance literature. Raising awareness is perceptible in the extent to which Habibi goes to
document and explain, often in footnotes, asides, non-fictional elements and quotes, Pales-
tinian history and geography. The ‘dialogue with the opposite’ forms the basis of his narra-
tive strategies in countering and subverting foundational Zionist myths and narratives.
Through linguistic word play and satire Habibi twists and turns stereotypes on their heads
to expose lies behind the cartoon-like images of Palestinians in Israel. The clearest example
is the story of Saeed, the protagonist, who is himself a collaborator, and who through his
misadventures inadvertently creates a counter-narrative that deconstructs and challenges
hegemonic paradigms, both Zionist as well as Arab.

What is most fascinating about Habibi’s work is not how it fits into a literary mold and
fulfills the tenets of resistance literature, but rather how it takes Kanafani’s initial remarks
on resistance in prose into an aesthetic realm beyond their original conceptions. Habibi’s
works weave a rich and complex tapestry of resistance that informs and asserts presence,
that subverts, inverts and defies, that re-writes and re-interprets, and that remembers and
historicizes. Ultimately, Habibi’s works raise profound questions about the manipulation of
truth in the process of narrative construction itself.

The short story Kanafani selects to include in the anthology section of his 1968 study
appears under the title of the name of the author, Abu Salam (Abū Salām). In the footnote
Kanafani indicates that it is the second short story of a work in six sections entitled “Sextet
of the Six Days,” but that it is also a stand-alone short story initially published in *al-Jadīd*
that same year. In the book version of Habibi’s *Sudāṣiyyat al-ayyām al-sitta* (*Sextet of the
Six Days) (1969), the short story appears under the title “Wa-akhīrān nawwara al-lawz” (“At last, the almonds have blossomed”). The story, as it appears in Sudāsiyya, tells of a young man who decided to write about Haifa and Nazareth, inspired by Charles Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities (1859) and a certain “magical duality” (29) in his life. The story is ultimately about love, memory, the past and survival—all recurring themes in Habibi’s later works. A narrator relates how a man, who was once brimming with life and hope in his youth, kills his memory to keep a clear conscience (31). The man, a good friend of the narrator, goes in search of the protagonists of a very beautiful love story that he remembers from his youth. He visits his friend seeking help in putting the pieces together. While relating all his efforts, the narrator realizes that his friend has forgotten that it was his own love story that he is pursuing and that “lit up our youth” (38) and wonders “how is it possible for someone to kill such love in his heart?” (37)

The short stories of Sudāsiyya were written after the 1967 war and emphasize one of the unintended consequences of the Israeli occupation of all of historic Palestine: reunions. After twenty years of separation, Palestinians were able to reconnect to each other and to the rest of the Arab world. The stories tell of an awakening, of a repressed love and love for the homeland that is reignited after a period of isolation. Habibi returns to this theme later in his life and further develops it in novel form in Ikhṭiyya (1985) and Sarāyā. Habibi’s short stories in Sudāsiyya document the often-overlooked experience of Palestinians ‘inside’ emerging from the shock of isolation to the shock of waking up to “all Palestinians being in the same prison” (8). However, Habibi asserts that those who “remained in the playgrounds of childhood are studying the land and its contours with their bare feet” and are more faithful to the land than those owners of bygone orchards who sold their homeland (ibid.). This kind of ‘documenting with bare feet’ becomes one of Habibi’s narrative strategies in tracing Palestinian history, past and present, through its geography. There is an implicit mission in raising awareness and capturing a Palestine lost to most Palestinians, but there is already also a perceptible element of defiance. Habibi’s aim, as stated in his introduction to the Sudāsiyya, is to subvert the meaning of what the Israelis called the six-day war and “to show the other face of the tragedy of this war” (8). In this way, Habibi tests his defiance and counter-narrative strategies with the Naksa of 1967 in the Sudāsiyya, using it as a basis to tackle the roots of the tragedy, the Nakba of 1948, in his later novels.

The seeds of resistance literature, as Kanafani saw them, are firmly planted in Habibi’s early short stories. But it is in The Pessoptimist, written a few years later, that Habibi’s narrative ingenuity shines most brightly. By making direct interventions into the historical record, imparting new previously concealed facts, Habibi begins a process of re-writing, inverting the foundation texts of Zionist discourse, challenging the hegemony of the Hebrew language, and twisting Palestinian and Arab ideals. One of the early scenes in the novel is the gathering of fleeing Palestinians in the al-Jazzar mosque in Acre the night before their deportation and condemnation to a life of dispossession as refugees. Angelika Neuwirth has done work on the inversion of biblical and messianic ideas in Habibi’s work. She highlights the scene in the al-Jazzar mosque as an example of inverting the messianic Zionist idea of the “ingathering of the exiles” and exposing it in its Palestinian reversal: lamm al-shaml (family reunification) (208), the gathering before exile.

Through his love for the Arabic language—he never wrote in Hebrew—Habibi draws on the turāth, the Arab literary heritage, as well as Palestinian folk knowledge and history to create a rich multilayered narrative that simultaneously asserts Palestinian presence and counters Zionist claims. Highlighting the entangled roots of Palestinians to the land exposes
The falsity of claims such as ‘a land without a people for people without a land.’ Political criticism is also enshrined in puns that play on the similarity between Hebrew and Arabic. For example, when Saeed first arrives back in the city of Haifa—having fled with his family in 1948 and returned—he is welcomed by an Israeli soldier who greets him in Arabic: “Ahlan wa sahlan fi medinat Israel!” Saeed panics and misinterprets the statement to mean that the Israelis have changed the name of his native city into the city of Israel. Later on he realizes that with the slight differences of stress the same word means “state” in Hebrew, and that it is not only his city that has been renamed but the entire country is now called Israel. In another episode Saeed’s aunt mispronounces the Arabic word “maḥṣiyya” to mimic the Israeli pronunciation “makhṣiyya,” which creates a comic tension that draws an equivalence between being counted in the Israeli census (the former) and being castrated (the latter). The use of Hebrew in Habibi’s works exposes a certain intrinsic affinity between the two languages that the Israeli state will diligently strive to repress or coopt. Interjections into the Hebrew language of Palestinian experiences also takes away from its exclusivity as a “vessel that contains Jewish memories” (Neuwirth 202).

Through numerous language-based interventions, Habibi shows the flip side of language-as-salvation, which Kanafani held in high regard, to also expose language-as-deception and propaganda. Habibi goes even further, using puns to break away from the canons of Palestinian symbolism, for example, playing on the similarity between the words fidāʾī (resistance fighter) and faḍāʾī (extraterrestrial). Breaking through the language barriers, Habibi was able to create one of the best-loved Palestinian anti-heroic characters in Saeed. Kanafani may have foreseen an element of self-criticism but he may have not imagined how narratives will develop to also be critical of nationalism and Arab and Palestinian heroic stereotypes. A reaction against the burden of responsibility as well as the accusations of collaboration from the Arab world, Habibi’s character Saeed is no heroic fighter, martyr or liberator, he is a fumbling, anti-heroic fool. He is also not the kind of collaborator the state wants, which becomes evident when his excessive loyalty to the Israeli state lands him in jail. Even the ideal of a deep-rooted connection to the land is shattered at the realization that Saeed does not know the names of many of the villages in his own country. This is where Habibi appeals to the turāth through numerous references and footnotes, but he also subverts canonical knowledge and uses it to expose falsehoods, revealing that the “gap between cultural rhetoric and current fact is too great” (Heath 167).

Habibi exposes the full extent of how language is a double-edged sword, but eventually returns to the idea of language-as-salvation. Ultimately, through the letters he writes from outer space, Saeed narrates his own story. The role of the writer, as Kanafani and others have envisioned it, is associated with the language-as-salvation trope. In fact, as well as seeing The Pessoptimist as a series of counter-representations and subversive deconstructions, it is also the story of how Saeed became a writer who breaks the silence of his generation and remembers, narrates, and historicizes. However, to fulfill his mission, as Neuwirth argues, Saeed would have had to free himself:

[…] he has stepped out of the mythical triad configuration—real homeland, the intellectual as its liberator, and the ideal homeland […] Only now can he follow his mission to recall what has been lost, without mythically ‘bringing it back.’ (216)

Saeed ‘brings back’ his narrative not only through language but also the exposure of the silence that veils the lives of Palestinians in Israel. In The Pessoptimist, language and speech are set in contrast to the keeping of secrets and a forced fearful silence. There is the example
of an entire village in The Pessoptimist, the unrecognized village of Salaka, which, according to Israeli authorities, does not exist. Its real presence is thus ensured through its population’s strict rules of silence. Saeed’s narrative tells a story of repression of language and speech, but by doing so he is also constructing a new world-historical order—that of the marginal, peripheral and oppressed—which can be the mark of a Palestinian return to history.6

One of the most remarkable features of Habibi’s works is the humor created out of the tension between satire, irony and tragedy in the narrative. While this tension is already present, albeit subtly in Sudāsiyya, it is in The Pessoptimist that it is at its sharpest and most animated. It is also remarkable that Kanafani in his 1966 study had paid special attention to the role of the tragi-comic in resistance literature. Kanafani writes that, in the context Palestinians found themselves in under occupation, the writer finds nothing more serious to deploy than irony (67), what he called al-baliyya al-latḍḥaku (the tragi-comic) (70). He saw in irony a kind of ṣumūd, but believed that this al-sukhriyya al-ṣāmida (steadfast satire) (69) springs from a faith that what is happening is a temporary trial and that the nightmare will one day pass (ibid.). This was in 1966, when many believed the liberation of Palestine was possible. However, after the 1967 war, Habibi and others realized that the Zionist machinery is no passing matter, and took irony and satire to more sophisticated levels as a strategy of counter-narration in prose. Through an interesting connection between irony, folk wisdom and folktales, Kanafani brings about the beginnings of a conception of ‘folk satire.’

The kind of satire Kanafani invokes is very much present in Habibi’s works and gives the narrative its distinctive edge. As well as the use of Palestinian colloquial, which invokes folk traditions and sayings, Habibi also uses Palestinian folk literary forms, such as khurāfiyya (Palestinian folktale) and ustūra (legend), folk figures such as al-Khaḍer (after the figure of Saint George) and numerous folk songs as well as reference to folk medicine, plants, history and geography. Habibi’s elaborate narrative strategy of drawing on the Arabic tu-rāth, Palestinian folk, as well as references to world literature in narrating the Palestinian story creates a tragi-comic tension that produces powerful counter-narratives and what Kanafani calls al-taḥaddī (the challenge) in his 1966 study (78). The relationship between the tragi-comic, irony, satire, humor and folk, all of which are elements Kanafani brings to the fore, are worth more extensive exploration in the wider context of Palestinian literature to further understand their role in storytelling and resistance.7

The Kanafani Effect

The issues that Kanafani raises about his own conception of resistance literature are candid and relevant. One of the main points he discusses is a certain state of exception that he sees as inevitable when historicizing, analyzing and writing about Palestinian literature. In the preface to his 1966 study, Kanafani writes that attempts at historicizing the adab al-muqāwama of a certain people is usually undertaken after liberation (29). However, he continues, in the Palestinian case there is an urgent need for the Arab reader in general, and the dispossessed Palestinian in particular, to be constantly informed, in dialogue, and engaged with what is going on in the occupied lands—where the essence of the cause lies (ibid.). He confesses that his research lacks the ‘cold objectivity’ of academia. This is because the literature itself developed under abnormal and unique conditions, meaning that it cannot be made to submit to any preconceived standards. That is not to say that Kanafani’s analysis of the poems he includes in his study is free of criticism. For example, writing about Darwish’s early poetry in his 1968 study, Kanafani points out that one is shocked to find a gap-
ing aesthetic weakness (56). Similarly, he criticizes Samih al-Qasim for his excessive romanticism and limited horizons (ibid.). However, Kanafani goes on to trace the development of the style of these poets and their aesthetic and poetic leaps (56–57).

In part, Mahmoud Darwish directly responded to some of the questions Kanafani’s studies raise and the way it has impacted Palestinian literature. There is no doubt that Kanafani’s studies, which gave Palestinian literature emerging from under occupation a more enlightened status in the struggle, contributed to the rise of the ‘poets of resistance’ from invisibility to stardom. In his introduction to Kanafani’s collected works, Darwish writes: “I was born before, but it was you who announced my birth” (18). Until Kanafani coined the term, Darwish writes that they did not know they were writing resistance poetry, let alone poetry: “We were writing poetry without knowing that it was poetry. We were shouting, suffering, protesting, and we didn’t own any other tools of expression” (19). Darwish confesses that within their own context they were not taken seriously. In fact, the only poetry that was held in regard was the poetry that came from outside.

Habibi makes similar comments in the prologue of Sudāsiyya regarding prose writing. He writes that it was in fact recognition garnered from the ‘outside’ which made people back home pay attention to the works being published by al-Jādīd and other literary outlets (8). Although he does not mention Kanafani directly, he refers to the Lebanese magazine al-Ṭarīq, which included one of his stories in its special issue on Arabic literature in Israel in 1968, in turn facilitating the Sudāsiyya’s publication at al-Hilāl in Cairo in 1969, and the stories were thereafter turned into radio plays by various stations in the Arab world: “The Arab world took interest in our writing after 1967,” Habibi wrote in the prologue of Sudāsiyya, “because they realized they had neglected us” (8). In the introduction to Kanafani’s collected works, Darwish elaborates on the “injured Arab mentality” (20) that rediscovers Palestinians under occupation since 1948:

The Arab discovery that the Arabs in occupied Palestine speak Arabic, love their country, and hate oppression was a stunning revelation […] stunning to the point of shame. However, this allowed these newly discovered voices to spread and overcome the barriers and walls. (21)

Darwish however cautions against a kind of ‘state of exception’ that worships everything that comes out of the occupied lands. In his introduction, Darwish describes the aftereffects of their newly-found fame once Kanafani had directed the spotlight at their work:

[S]ome of us fainted from this sensuousness, and others began designing poems for the vocal chords of the presenters, and some of us were anxious and afraid of the responsibility. (20)

Darwish also warns against artistic merit being only a virtue of “geography as a non-negotiable gift” (21). Rather, Darwish saw in the attention of their new audiences an incentive to develop and grow, not to settle down and bask under the banner of Palestine: “Writing can’t achieve its resistance function unless it is good writing. Bad writing which incites, under any slogan, is as harmful as the worst weapon” (13). Darwish uses Kanafani himself as an example of a writer who worked tirelessly to perfect his art, insisting that it was not the bullets of the enemy that are the measure of his achievement, nor should his creative value be seen only in his death—“Kanafani was a writer of life,” Darwish proclaimed (12). However, Kanafani’s own writing did not escape criticism when, as Darwish explained, it “transformed from a style of calm description to higher and more complex aesthetic realms” (14). Once Kanafani’s writing reached a more complex stage, it did not escape from the difficult question of audience and reception that hovers over the works of many a
writer and poet, especially in the context of conflict and revolution. The question that haunted Kanafani’s late works, as Darwish put it in his introduction, was the accusation: “who understands this style?” (ibid.).

With this question of accessibility of poetry or prose, Darwish quite rightly points out that it is rare for the nation to dominate as it does in Palestinian literature (16). This is why Palestinians “have no mercy for their writers,” Darwish writes (ibid.)—they demand a kind of “model nationalism and subservience of steel” (ibid.), he explains, and they do not allow their writers to be “anything less than soldiers or priests” (ibid.). Darwish attributes this to having no faith in the effectiveness of literature to compensate for the humiliation when Palestinians “lost everything and owned nothing more than words” (ibid.). Darwish does not blame Kanafani, but rather raises important questions about the exploitation of the concept of resistance in the context of an ongoing struggle. After all, Kanafani successfully broke the siege around the situation of Palestinians in the occupied lands, Darwish reminds us in his introduction, enacting their ṣumūd through works of poetry (20). He warns against finding virtue in writing merely from the ‘inside,’ which he himself eventually chooses to leave to live in the ‘outside’ of exile.

The debate initiated through Kanafani’s resistance literature in the late 1960s develops an interesting dialogue on inside/outside. The outside admired the resistance of being taḥta al-iḥṭilāl, while the inside admired the self-confidence of exile, and life under the sun (taḥta al-shams). Habibi’s short stories give an insight into the beginnings of this dialogue after a twenty-year separation. In the short story “Umm al-rubā‘īkiā” (“The odds-and-ends woman”), part of Habibi’s Sudāsiyya collection, the narrator relates: “They shouted in our faces, did you not refuse to immigrate with us to Yathrib?” (41) The sentence reveals Koranic language influences: Yathrib is reference to Medina and the prophet’s immigration there after persecution in Mecca. Although Habibi comes from a Christian background, he was well versed in the Koran and its language influences are evident in all of his words. The narrator then continues to call the dispossession after the Nakba of 1948 the “sifr al-khurūj al-awwal” (the first exodus), a twist of language that swiftly transforms from Koranic to Biblical allusion, referencing the second of the five books of the Old Testament, Exodus, but applying it to the Palestinians. Such examples are referencing a larger question that dominates the narrative of Sudāsiyya: Why did those who left leave and why did those who stayed stay?

A dialogue between two young women prisoners, one from the inside (Haifa) and the other from the outside (Jerusalem), who find themselves under the same Israeli prison roof in the short story “Al-ḥubb fī-l-qalb” (“Love in the Heart”) in Sudāsiyya raises further questions not just about leaving and staying but also about return. The young narrator from Jerusalem, through letters to her mother, tells us about her new friend’s love for Fairuz’s song “Rājiʿūn” (“We shall return”). She asks her friend to explain what moves her about the song when, the narrator wonders, “you stayed in your homeland, never had to leave and don’t need to return?” (87) The friend replies: “My homeland? I feel like a refugee in a strange country. You dream of return and you live with this dream. But I, where shall I return?” (ibid.). When asked how she sees the future, the friend from Haifa replies distressed: “Every time I think about the future I see the past […] The future that I dream about is the past. Is this possible?” (89) The Jerusalemite narrator poses the question to her mother who had refused to return and visit Haifa: “Were you afraid to feel what this girl from Haifa feels?” (ibid.) The young woman then wonders whether the tragedy of those who stayed was greater than theirs.

In a much later work, his last work, a memoir entitled Sirāj al-ghīla (“The Ogress’ Lantern”) (1996), Habibi directly addresses some of these questions. He writes that “the tragedy
of the Palestinian people was all-encompassing affecting those who left (tarakū) and those who were left (turikū) finding no difference between the two” (37). However, given the choice, and despite finding nowhere in their homeland to be except raʾs al-khāzūq (the tip of a stake), Habibi writes in Sirāj that “we prefer raʾs al-khāzūq in the homeland rather than riḥāb al-ghurba (spaciousness of exile)—we found it full of nails and khawāzīq (tips of stakes), big and small” (18). What preoccupies Habibi, however, are “separations and imagined meetings” (9), as he writes in the prologue to Sudāsiyya. Kanafani was also preoccupied with this theme and it is Kanafani’s representation of an imagined meeting that infuriated Habibi. Kanafani’s novella Return to Haifa, set after the 1967 war, relates the story of a husband and wife who return to Haifa in search of a baby boy they left behind as they fled their home and village in the war of 1948 (Palestine’s Children). They find that their son, Khaldoun, was adopted by a Jewish woman and, now named Dov, he is a soldier in the Israeli army. The flawed descriptions of their journey to Haifa (Kanafani himself never returned) and the representation of their eventual meeting with their son is what Habibi took issue with and was at the bottom of the virtual debate. It is said that Habibi wrote The Pessoptimist in response to Return to Haifa to forge a new image of the Palestinians who remained in 1948.

According to the Lebanese writer Elias Khoury, in an article entitled “The Mirror: Imagining Justice in Palestine,” Habibi misread Kanafani’s novella, interpreting Khaldoun/Dov as the symbol of the Palestinian minority that remained on their land in what became Israel. Khoury argues that through the mirror of Dov, Kanafani was creating the image of the new Palestinian, who, like the new Israeli, will refuse memory and the past, condemn the cowardice of his fathers during the Nakba, and search for a new beginning (“The Mirror”). Khoury writes that Habibi frowned at and totally dismissed such an interpretation without further explanation. It was only when Khoury saw the words on Habibi’s tombstone, ‘I stayed in Haifa,’ that it all came together. The real essence of the struggle between Habibi and Kanafani, Khoury writes, was not about Khaldoun/Dov but about who writes the Palestinian story. Is it “the one who stayed in Haifa or the one who has been disposessed from Akka?” asks Khoury (Khūrī 10).

“What are you searching for?” Darwish asks Habibi in the poem “An appointment with Emile Habibi” about their anticipated meeting in Haifa, which was to mark Darwish’s first return to the city after his long exile (“Mawʿid” 112). The meeting, a literary duel “between two roosters” as Darwish describes it in the poem (ibid.), failed to take place—Habibi passed away shortly before Darwish’s arrival in Haifa. In the poetic dialogue, however, Habibi’s voice does respond: he is searching for “the difference between here and there” (ibid.). “Perhaps the distance,” Darwish suggests, “is like the ‘and’ between here and there, a metaphor for the distance between what is real and imaginary” (ibid.). This persistent question clearly preoccupied Habibi throughout his life, and is perceptible in his literary works since the Sudāsiyya, perhaps further egged on by Kanafani’s labeling but also provoked by his imagined return to Haifa. Although they each had their political differences, Darwish is keen to note in his obituary “Emile Habiby: You All-Sarcastic Enchanter” that Habibi chose to re-name himself at his death with “I stayed in Haifa” not because he wanted to distinguish between “those who stayed in the exile of their identity and those who want to return to the identity of their exile” (96). Rather, it is to engrave what does not need to be reconfirmed, Darwish writes, except to “confront a time during which the mother’s legitimacy was put in doubt” (ibid.).
Conclusion

If Kanafani, Habibi and Darwish have something in common, despite their physical, intellectual and political differences, it is that they realized they were fighting a war of narratives in their search for a homeland of words. This is what Kanafani’s studies on resistance literature tried to highlight early on—the importance of the battle of narratives together with, but also above and beyond, the armed struggle. Indeed, the relationships, between memory and the past, inside and outside, between those who stayed and those who left, between Palestinians and Israelis, have been re-written, re-interpreted and redeveloped since Kanafani’s volumes on resistance literature. Habibi is an excellent case study in highlighting the elements of prose narratives that Kanafani could only touch on in his short life so brutally cut short. Kanafani was able to anticipate the potential of satire, comedy and folk wisdom, but he probably did not imagine what Habibi was able to do with these elements in his folk satire masterpiece The Pessoptimist.

Both Habibi and Kanafani held in high regard what Habibi called ‘documenting with bare feet’ Palestinian life in Israel. However, it was Darwish that drew attention to the dangers of exploiting the virtues of the direct connection with the land as a non-negotiable gift. What is clear is that the notion of resistance persists and so does the question of inside/outside. However, in light of ongoing conflict and tragedies since Kanafani’s untimely death, as well as changes on the ground which have effectively merged the old ‘inside/outside’ under the same prison roof, the crucial question remains: What is resistance? What is the meaning of resistance in all aspects of life now that the revolutionary context of the 1960s and 1970s has metamorphosed into an era of endless so-called peace processes? Ultimately, the state of exception that Kanafani points to in his studies, combined with his chosen methodology, lead to larger questions that challenge the conventions of criticism. Has there been indeed an inability to theorize in times of upheaval due to a certain intellectual interruption? How do we then approach literature coming out of more than sixty years of conflict and upheaval? What are the new spaces for contesting conventions that it creates? These elements and questions are ripe for further research. Although we are still mourning the recent loss of the last of the trinity of resistance poets, Samih al-Qasim, we need to look and delve more deeply into the works of the younger generation of writers who have experimented with and transformed the notion of everyday resistance.

Notes


2 Wherever a published English translation of a text exists, the English title of that translation will be used throughout the article. However, page numbers always reference the original Arabic text.

3 The poster may be viewed online at the Palestine Poster Project Archives. “This Revolution is Not Merely a Gun.” The Palestine Poster Project Archives, n.d. Web. 1 Dec. 2014. Also of interest is an article: Barker,

Harlow, Barbara. Kanafānī. In addition to Ghassan Kanafānī’s and Barbara Harlow’s work on Palestinian resistance literature, see also: 

For more on resistance literature, theory and politics, see Harlow 30. 

All translations from the Arabic texts are mine.

Works Cited


