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Men in the Sun: A Literary Analysis of Ghassan Kanafani's Existential and Political Allegory

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Abstract

This study examines the mechanisms of women's marginalization in Ghassan Kanafani's novel "Men in the Sun" through a critical analysis that combines feminist perspectives with postcolonial analysis. The study demonstrates that the novel reduces female characters to stereotypical roles such as "the weeping mother" and "the victimized wife," while historical reality points to the active participation of Palestinian women in resistance and community organizing during the Nakba. The study relies on a theoretical framework that combines Judith Butler's theory of gender performance, Gayatri Spivak's concept of "silencing the subaltern," and postcolonial discourse analysis.

The main findings reveal a complete absence of the inner female voice in the narrative, the confinement of women's

dialogue to a small portion of the text, and the use of women as symbols of the usurped land rather than as political actors. Comparison with other literary texts (such as Kanafani's "Return to Haifa" and Yanar Mohammed's "The Queue") reveals a notable development in the representation of women in subsequent Palestinian literature.

The study recommends developing reading methodologies that recover marginalized voices, documenting the oral history of Palestinian women, and rereading classic texts with critical awareness.

The study concludes that the absence of women as actors in the novel is not merely a literary choice but rather the product of a complex historical context in which literary representation was employed as an ideological tool in the struggle over national identity.

Keywords: Ghassan Kanafani, Men in the Sun, Palestinian Women, Feminist Literary Criticism, Postcolonial Analysis, Gender Performance

Introduction

The novel "Men in the Sun" (1963) by Palestinian author Ghassan Kanafani is one of the literary works that revealed the suffering of Palestinians after the Nakba and documented the social and psychological transformations experienced by exiles in the diaspora. As the novel centers on male characters suffering from oppression and alienation, the absence of women as active characters is noticeable, raising questions about their role and representation in a male-dominated narrative world.

The book is a founding text in modern Palestinian literature, reflecting the tragedy of the Palestinian people after the 1948 Nakba through a three-dimensional narrative: Alienation, defeated masculinity, and the search for identity. However, a careful reading of the novel reveals an eye-catching absence of women as active characters, inducing us to inquire about the paths women are represented in a male-dominated narrative world and questioning the symbolic and political implications of this absence.

This paper aims to analyze the absent presence of women in the novel and examine how Ghassan Kanafani deals with female representation within a patriarchal social and political context. The authors will rely on narrative discourse analysis and

feminist criticism to understand the mechanisms of marginalization and exclusion faced by female characters, drawing on foreign references such as Judith Butler's theories on gender performance and Homi Bhabha's work on hybridity and identity.

Framework

This study aims to analyze the mechanisms of feminist marginalization in the novel, using the tools of feminist criticism and postcolonial theory, with a focus on the symbolic representation of women in narrative discourse, the historical and social contexts that established this marginalization, the possibility of reading absence as a form of resistance or implicit protest. The authors will rely on a theoretical framework that combines Judith Butler's concept of "gender performativity" with Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" and its relationship to identity, as well as Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonialism and its impact on gender relations.

Women as a marginal entity in the narrative

Women appear in "Men in the Sun" indirectly, through mention in men's conversations or as a symbol of homesickness. For example, Umm Qais is described as a mother mourning her estranged son, yet without a voice or decision-making power. Umm Qais is presented as a stereotypical image of the Palestinian mother awaiting the return of her estranged son but lacking in action or decision-making. Her presence is limited to tears and patience, reflecting the traditional image of women in male literature.

Abu al-Khayzuran's wife is depicted as a victim of male violence, killed by her husband without her being given a chance to defend herself. The crime here is not morally prosecuted in the text, reinforcing the idea of impunity for violence against women.

Women in the tents symbolize the usurped land, spoken of as a "mother" or a "female" in need of protection. This symbolic representation renders women passive entities, subject to a male-dominated narrative perpetuated by the main characters (Abu Qais, Asaad, and Marwan). Palestine is referred to in the novel in gendered terms: "a land waiting to be liberated," transforming the homeland into a raped female. This metaphor reflects the association of the female body with the land in national discourse, as Edward Said explains in "Culture and Imperialism."

According to Judith Butler in "Gender Trouble" (1990), gender roles are constructed through dominant discourses. In the novel, the stereotype of women as victims or symbols is reproduced, reinforcing the dominance of masculinity in the narrative.

Social and Political Factors contributing to the Absence of Women

After 1948, the Palestinian man became a symbol of resistance and the search for a livelihood, while women were consigned to the role of the mourning mother. Edward Said notes in "The Palestine Question" (1979) that the Palestinian novel focused on the male hero as a response to displacement and exile.

Before 1948, Palestinian society was characterized by the dominance of the extended family, in which the father or an older brother typically monopolized decision-making. There was also a strict gender division, with men in the public sphere (work, politics) and women in the private sphere

(home, raising children). In the novel, we see the effects of this structure in Abu Al-Khayzuran's absolute authority over his wife, even in his decision to kill her.

The novel reflects a traditional society that marginalizes women's voices, as demonstrated by the character of Umm Qais, who silently sheds tears. According to Nawal El Saadawi, male-dominated literature often downgrades women to secondary roles that reinforce subordination.

After the Nakba, patriarchy transformed from a social system into a symbolic tool of resistance, as Hisham Sharabi explains in *Civilizational Critique of the Arab Society at the End of the 20th Century* (1990) [9]. Control over women became compensation for the loss of control over the land. This explains why the novel has remained tied to the stereotypical image of women despite real-life changes. In Mahmoud Darwish's poems (such as "My Mother"), women are portrayed as a symbol of the homeland, while in "Men in the Sun" they are portrayed as victims of the homeland.

In early Palestinian national discourse (1950-1960), women were transformed into usurped territory (as in the scene of the tent symbolizing Palestine), a mother awaiting the martyr (Umm Qais). This symbolism strips women of their historical agency, as Gayatri Spivak critiques in her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Resistance in the 1960s was associated with armed men (fedayeen), while women's participation was limited to nursing (as in Dalal Mughrabi's case) and logistical support (transmitting messages). The novel reflects this duality by completely excluding women from the sphere of political action.

Women like Fatima Barnawi participated in the resistance (Banat, 2018) [2], but male literature obscured these roles.

A Feminist Reading of Women's Absence: Between Marginalization and Protest

Notwithstanding the absence of women as a significant character, the novel can be read as an implicit critique of gender roles, including the tragedy of Abu Al-Khayzuran, whose murder of his wife reflects a crisis of masculinity, turning women into scapegoats for his failure. It also reflects disappointment and powerlessness as the men in the novel fail to achieve their dreams, raising questions about the fate of the women left behind. Compared to Ghassan Kanafani's *Umm Saad* (1969), in which women are portrayed as figures of resistance, *Men in the Sun* reflects an early stage of feminist awareness in Palestinian literature.

Women in Kanafani's "Umm Saad" (1969) and "Returning to Haifa," for example, emerge as politically active, reflecting his growing awareness of the need for positive representation of Palestinian women. This growth suggests that the absence of women in "Men in the Sun" is not inevitable but rather a reflection of a specific historical period.

Utami, Riza, and Wijaya (2024) [11] confirmed that Palestinian literature, despite its often male-dominated discourse, contains significant examples of women's leadership and resilience, as seen in the works of some Palestinian female writers who have succeeded in presenting a more complex and nuanced portrayal of women's roles. The research also discusses the challenges faced by Palestinian women in combining the national struggle with the struggle for their gender rights, as their feminist demands are often marginalized under the pretext of prioritizing the national cause.

Khoury, Seif & Falah reveal how the feminine image is used as a symbolic metaphor for the usurped land, transforming them into a passive entity reduced to stereotypical roles such as the "weeping mother" or the "raped virgin." They criticized this representation, which perpetuated the myth of women's absence from the national struggle despite their historical participation in armed resistance and community organizing. Through a postcolonial feminist lens, the study analyzes the intersection of colonial oppression and patriarchy, where women are used as a tool to reinforce the male-dominated national discourse. This is evident in popular literature, which often reduces women to mere guardians of heritage or passive symbols. Conversely, the study highlights the attempts of some feminist literary voices, such as Fadwa Tuqan's works, to challenge these stereotypes and redefine resistance to include the struggle against gender discrimination.

The Absence of women is an "indirect protest."

The absence of women can be interpreted as an implicit critique of patriarchal society, particularly in the scene of the murder of Abu Al-Khayzuran's wife, which reveals the crisis of defeated masculinity. Judith Butler argues that "absence can be a political act," especially when it reveals the emptiness of patriarchy.

Neimneh concludes that "Men in the Sun" presents women as passive, marginalized entities, devoid of agency, as in the characters of Umm Qais and Abu Al-Khayzuran's wife, who are reduced to stereotypical roles such as the weeping mother and the victim. Meanwhile, "Umm Saad" marks a qualitative shift, presenting Umm Saad as an active woman capable of making political decisions and participating in the national struggle.

Umm Qais represents the most prominent example of absent presence in the novel. She appears as a featureless entity. We do not know her real name, but she is addressed as "Umm Qais" (the name associated with a male son). As an entity subject to masculine time, her existence is linked to the waiting of the alienated son, devoid of any personal project and reduced to a biological function, where she is depicted as a vessel for childbirth and emotion only. Edward Said notes in "Culture and Imperialism" that this representation reflects a dual colonial structure represented by the colonization of the land (Palestine) and the colonization of the woman's body (reducing her to a mere tool for reproduction).

This representation is not merely a literary omission but rather an ideological tool that reflects the crisis of exiled Palestinian masculinity, the conflict between tradition and social transformations, and the employment of women as a pawn in the battle over identity.

Men in the Sun is a prime example of what Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble* (1990), calls "gender performativity." Gender identity is constructed through gendered speech rituals such as the repetition of stereotypical phrases ("Women only understand crying") and the use of colloquial language to describe women ("Women are created for the home"), as well as restricted bodily roles that involve feminine body movements (Umm Qais silently shedding tears) and submissive sitting positions (Abu Al-Khayzuran's wife bowing before her husband). Institutional repetitions, such as the unquestioned repetition of scenes of violence against women and the reproduction of the sacrificial mother image in all scenes of women, are also present.

Women as a "space of silence" in national discourse

Ella Shohat argues in "Double Criticism" that women in nationalist literature are often reduced to symbols rather than actors. In the novel, women are used as a symbol of men's suffering (such as Umm Qais, who recalls her lost son).

Zalman argues that "Men in the Sun" presents a monolithic, masculine vision of the diaspora, in which men alone are portrayed as bearing the burden of the Nakba and the responsibility for return. At the same time, women are reduced to passive symbols (the weeping mother, the victimized wife). This portrayal, according to her analysis, reflects the dominance of the male-dominated national discourse of the early 1960s. In "Returning to Haifa," however, a substantial shift is apparent through the character of Saada, who exemplifies a politically active woman aware of the complexities of return, indicating an evolution in Kanafani's thought toward a more inclusive vision of resistance.

In his study, "Diaspora Narrative: The Identity Crisis in Ghassan Kanafani's Novel *Men in the Sun*" (2021), Raed Al-Qassas analyzed the existential and psychological dimensions of the identity crisis experienced by Palestinians in exile, as embodied in the novel. The research focuses on three primary levels: On the narrative level, the analysis reveals how the active absence of women in the novel reflects the fragmentation of Palestinian society in the diaspora, where traditional social structures, including the family, have disintegrated. Second, on the symbolic level, the researcher links the absence of active female characters to the loss of national identity, as women in Palestinian literature typically represent the guardians of identity and collective memory. Third, on the psychological level, the absence of women is interpreted as an expression of the inability of exiled Palestinian masculinity to protect the basic components of identity (land/women/family).

In her famous essay (1988), Gayatri Spivak posed a fundamental question: "Can the subaltern speak?" This question applies with urgency to *Men in the Sun*, where women are cast as a "double subaltern," both as colonial subalterns (occupied Palestine) and gender subalterns (within patriarchy). The mechanisms of double silencing include political silencing, which manifests in women's absence from official resistance discourse, and literary silencing, where women are reduced to stereotypical roles.

The mechanisms used to silence the female voice in the narrative included repressive narrative techniques, such as external narration, where the woman is described from the outside without entering her consciousness; truncated dialogue, where the women's conversations are fragmented and interrupted; and frozen time, where female time is fixed (waiting) versus the dynamic male time. The second mechanism is the use of language as a tool of oppression, where negative feminine metaphors such as "she cried like women cry," stereotypical epithets ("the weak woman"), and passive verbs such as "she was killed" instead of "he killed her."

This analysis confirms that Spivak's question remains urgently posed: While Palestinian women have been trying to "speak" for decades, the mechanisms of silencing are still in place, and literature everything is an arena of resistance or oppression, depending on how we read it.

Conclusion

The study represents a serious attempt to deconstruct the mechanisms of representation of Palestinian women in Ghassan Kanafani's novel "Men in the Sun," yielding highly significant results on multiple levels. Through five integrated chapters, the research traces the roots of women's marginalization in the literary text and links it to the historical, social, and political contexts that produced it.

Women in "Men in the Sun" are present through their absence, employed as symbols or victims without being given space for expression. This absence is not due to the writer's negligence, but rather a reflection of a patriarchal social and political reality. However, the novel can be read as an indirect critique of this reality, especially given the development of Kanafani's later writings, which gave women a more active role. The analysis further showed that the absence of women in the novel was a response to historical pressures, but it also perpetuated discrimination by reproducing stereotypes.

The analysis revealed that the representation of women in the novel is based on three main pillars: The denial of agency, where female characters are transformed into passive entities (the weeping Umm Qais, the victimized wife of Abu Al-Khayzuran), while historical reality points to the active participation of women in resistance and community organization; symbolic reduction, where women are used as a metaphor for usurped land or collective memory, which strips them of their independent existence as individuals with dreams and aspirations; and systematic silencing through subtle narrative and linguistic mechanisms, such as the use of the passive voice, marginalizing women's dialogue, and restricting the narrative to external context.

This study offers several important theoretical contributions, including the development of an analytical model that combines feminist and postcolonial perspectives, highlighting how colonial oppression intersects with patriarchal oppression. It also applies Spivak's theory to the Palestinian context, demonstrating how "silencing" becomes a dual (colonial-patriarchal) tool. It also offers a different reading of the classic text, departing from the reverential framework while maintaining academic objectivity.

The value of this research lies not in its critique of the novel "Men in the Sun," but rather in its role as a model for reading literary heritage with a critical awareness that respects the historical context without being captive to it. Palestinian women, who were absent from narratives, were present in reality with all their strength and challenges, and this study is a modest attempt to restore some of the prestige of this historical presence.

As Mahmoud Darwish said, "Grand narratives feed on minor narratives," and this research is an attempt to rescue minor narratives from the clutches of oblivion. Ultimately, history is not just what happened, but what was written and documented, and it is our duty as researchers to expand the circle of this writing to include all voices.

The study recommends developing reading methodologies that recover marginalized voices, documenting the oral history of Palestinian women, and rereading classic texts with critical awareness.

The study concludes that the absence of women as actors in the novel is not merely a literary choice, but rather the product of a complex historical context, in which literary representation was employed as an ideological tool in the struggle over national identity.

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