

## When Man is a Cause: The Undecidability of Belonging in Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*



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**ABSTRACT:** The focus of my article is on the undecidability of Dov's/ Khaldun's identity throughout his conversations with Said X., his 'biological father', along with some significant selective semiotic referents in Ghassan Kanafani's novella *Returning to Haifa*. These aspects are highlighted to elicit/ trace Kanafani's implied symbolism of Palestine, the land, and the undecidability/ conflict of its belonging to critique (healthy self-criticism) the submission of the Palestinians as being guilty of ceding with their land then keep crying to restore it. The novella has been previously tackled from a variety of perspectives: parody, intertextuality, characterization, among others. However, the key parts of the novella that show the conflict between father/ son, self/other, right/loss are the conversations between Dov/Khaldun and Said X. To achieve the article's goal, Derrida's conception of undecidability is employed to indicate the inability to take a decision due to factors beyond the focal character's, Dov/Khaldun, means. This state of freeplay makes it impossible to settle to any side/identity. In Dov's/ Khaldun's case, it is the indeterminate area between the biological Palestinian identity and the acquired Jewish identity. Given that, this view of undecidability is supplemented by other related philosophical aspects such as identity of the 'I', the conception of belonging, and the symbolic reflection between the Dov/ Khaldun: the Jew/ the Palestinian: the Colonizer/ the Colonized (both Man and the land). The analyses of the novella reveal that a state of bewilderment and vortex of undecidable identity opens once Dov Iphrat Koshin, the Israeli soldier, knows he was born Khaldun Said, the Palestinian citizen. Dov's/ Khaldun's words to Said X. show a defensive attitude whereas his semiotic behavior reflects the pain of the truth, and that since that moment, he will not be able to settle; his identity is undecidable between Israel/ Palestine, Zionists/ Palestinians, Colonizer/ Colonized, Judaism/ Islam... Kanafani provides a criticism of the Self, here. As the Palestinians of 1948 escaped from their homes forsaking their land to the foreign occupation and then they (with the Arabs and Muslims) did nothing to restore it but waiting and weeping. Kanafani's self criticism is healthy as being the first step towards profoundly diagnosing the problem, the loss of Palestine, so as to find practical final solutions for the problem.

**KEYWORD:** Identity, Palestine, *Returning to Haifa*, undecidability.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The Palestinian cause has been the most painful and self-determining issue of Arabs, Muslims, and all fair people around the world since Al-Nakbah (the Catastrophe) of 1948. Of the generation of the Palestinians who lived the experience of displacement and exile after being indulged in the prosperity of Palestine had emerged an elite of patriotic fighters of the Palestinian land and identity through militant, political, and literary means, of course among others. This rightful defensive attitude is achieved through both highlighting the tragic consequences of Al-Nakbah on the Palestinians inside and outside Palestine and practicing a kind of self-criticism, especially in fictional (like the resistance literature to be briefed next) and non-fictional works, which, as I think, a positive step towards diagnosing the problem to properly solve it.

### II. RESISTANCE LITERATURE

A good start of this section is by a summing up expression, or if I can call it an aphorism, "Palestinian literature is at the heart of Palestinian struggle" [1]. Mir defines the Palestinian literature of resistance as the bulk of literary production appeared to legitimize and publicize the Palestinian cause as a means to 'resist' the colonial injustice. Mahmoud Darwish, Samih Al-Qasem, Fadwa Tuqan, Ghassan Kanafani, among others, portray their own experiences of persecution, displacement, and exile during and after Al-Nakbah along with reflecting how these experiences reshape their identities. Heba Wadi (2020) provides an anthology of definitions of the term [2] that I can summarize as the voice of the oppressed against any kind of colonization. The coinage of the expression "Resistance Literature" is assigned to Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972).

## When Man is a Cause: The Undecidability of Belonging in Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*

### A. *Kanafani's oeuvre*

He was born in Acre, Palestine and, at the age of 12, he, with his family, were exiled by the Zionist invasion of 1948. They first settled in Lebanon then Syria. He devoted his political activities and writing for the cause of Palestine which was portrayed as a symbol of human deprivation, especially in his later works. Kanafani joined several political movements such as Arab Nationalist Movement (1953) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). He works as a writer and editor of a number of magazines and dailies such as *Al-Rai*, *Al-Fajr*, *Al-Muharrir*, *Al-Anwar*, and *Al-Hadaf*. He was assassinated by the Mosad in Lebanon 1972 [3]. His work combines political urgency with an innovative literary style and powerful storytelling [4]. "Politics and the novel," Ghassan Kanafani once said, "are an indivisible case." Fadl al-Naqib has reflected that Kanafani "wrote the Palestinian story, then he was written by it." His narratives offer entry into the Palestinian experience of the conflict that has anguished the people of the Middle East for most of the twentieth century" [5]. Among his works: *Men Under the Sun* (1963), *The Land of Sad Oranges* (1963), *The death of Bed No. 12* (1961).

### B. *Returning to Haifa* (1970)

The novella is included in an anthology of Kanafani's short stories and other fictional works titled *Palestine Children*. It narrates the painful departure and return of Said X and Safiyya, his wife, from Haifa during one of the tricky Jewish means of Palestinian evacuation from and the diasporic Jews' settlement in the Land of Palestine and then their return to Haifa after twenty years. Said X. was unable to return to his apartment in which he left his wife and his newly born boy, Khaldun, because of the floods of people escaping a sudden British-Jewish attack in Haifa. Safiyya was worried so she just went outside the building neighborhood searching for her husband leaving her baby sleeping inside the apartment. She too was carried by the sudden rush of runners towards the beach where she met Said X. They were forced to be evacuated without any chance to explain or to return to take their son. Twenty years later, they returned to find their apartment had been confiscated by a Jewish family who looked after the boy as the couple did not have children. Said X. and Safiyya were shocked by the fact that Khaldun had become Dov, a reservist in the Jewish military forces. Dov/Khaldun refused to accept them blaming them of being uncivilized and passive as their only attempt to restore him had only been 'crying' for twenty years. They left defeated, and left the boy shattered. All realized the tragic consequences of Al-Nakbah upon those who remained inside and those who were forced to leave, especially the children. Said X. also realized that it had been his fault since the beginning, and he paid for it as all the Palestinians have been doing.

Considering the introductory summary, the novella attracts the academic attention, Campbell (2001) argues that the novella's arguments can be read in different contradictory ways, "this novel as a work of literature works against rather than in favor of its arguments" (p. 53), i.e., with or against the Palestinian cause [6]. For me, in both cases, the novella provides a critique of the self-pitying the loss and criticizing the passive and helpless attempts to restore Palestine. Due to this quantum-like feature of the novella, Sheehri (2010) compares two Jewish texts that parody Kanafani's novella. The author discusses the intertextual discourse between the three texts of which the original calls for a wide variety of interpretations. The parodies exploit this feature and provide readings that elaborate on some details to highlight the reading of the "other side!"/the Jewish side [7]. In terms of linguistic contradictory perspectives to highlight similar tendencies, Jasim (2015) analyzes Kanafani's "Returning to Haifa," and Holm's *I Am David* to compare and contrast them in light of the concept "raison d'etre" to uncover the common tendency of both which can be summarized as the call of reasonable coexistence for humanity [8]. Given that, in another comparison between Kanafani's novella Shamma's *Arabesque* and Elhallaq and Habeeb focus on Kanafani's representation of the aggressive collective but the milder more human individual identities of the colonizers (The Jews) employing the technique of juxtaposition and parallelism within the postcolonial discourse. As for Shamma's text, *Arabesque*, they highlight the similar juxtaposition technique to highlight the Palestinian 1948 Crisis with the difference that Shamma uses Hebrew as a medium of discourse unlike Kanafani's Arabic text [9].

Regarding the portrayal of characterization, Nasiri and Hossaini (2016) descriptively analyze the characterization of Kanafani's text. They highlight the significance of the conflict between the Palestinian and the Zionist characters and their physical, psychological, social, and intellectual aspects [10]. With a more deconstructive perspective, Mohammad and Meryan (2019) argue that Kanafani, in this novella, provides a novel view of the 'home' as transcendental and fluid. He attempts to transform the whole Palestinian cause from a traumatic past into a process of resistance. Mohammad and Meryan (2019) focus on three Kanafanian sites: body, land, and text as processes of becoming [11]. El-Hussari (2019) shows that the focal issues in Kanafani's novella are the multidimensional dilemma faced by the four major characters at the psychological level basically, and the reconceptualization of homeland and familial relationships. To prove this, he focuses on analyzing the discourse of these characters that is revealing of contradictory personal perspectives employing social psychology and attribution theories to foreground the relationship between the textual and real levels [12].

Depending on the reviewed previous studies, the novella has been tackled from a variety of perspectives: parody, intertextuality, characterization, among others. However, the key parts of the novella that show the conflict between father/ son, self/other, right/loss are the conversations between Dov/Khaldun and with Said X., his biological father. Therefore, the focus of my article is on the undecidability of Dov/ Khaldun's identity throughout these conversations, along with some significant selective semiotic referents. These aspects are highlighted to elicit/ trace Kanafani's implied symbolism of Palestine, the land, and the

## When Man is a Cause: The Undecidability of Belonging in Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*

undecidability/ conflict of its belonging to critique (healthy self-criticism) the submission of the Palestinians as being guilty for ceding with their land/ identity then keep crying to restore it.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Undecidable identity is the basic theoretical concept in this study. Derrida's conception of undecidability is employed to indicate the inability to take a decision due to factors beyond the focal character's, Dov/Khaldun, means. Betas (2005) argues that Derrida's conception of undecidability is chiefly about the political context of interwar [13]. Reynolds (2002) provides a contrast between Merleau-Ponty's philosophical balance of undecidability and Derrida's openended conception which relies on aporia [14]. Norval (2004) supports Derrida's reading of the concept in terms of politics as supporting democracy unlike the common understanding that undecidability enhances hegemony [15] while Lucy (2004) emphasizes Derrida's tendency towards an ethical and political employment of the conception [16]. Derrida himself explains that his conception has three features: incompleteness, resisting binarity, heterogeneous [17] and [18]. This state of freeplay makes it impossible to settle to any side/identity. In Dov/ Khaldun's case, it is the indeterminate area between the biological Palestinian identity and the acquired Jewish identity. Given that, this view of undecidability is supplemented by other related philosophical aspects such identity of the 'I', the conception of belonging, and the symbolic reflection between the Dov/ Khaldun: the Jew/ the Palestinian: the Colonizer/ the Colonized (both Man and the land).

Considering the text, I used both the original one written in Arabic and Harlow and Riley's translation [19]. My initial impression and analyses were built upon the original text [20], then I used the accredited translation indicated above. However, I kept my own translation of Said X. name which was translated as Said S. because I suggested Kanafani used the Arabic letter "س" in the name "عبد س س" to indicate an unknown/lost identity rather than an abbreviation of another specific name never mentioned in the text! Another point I kept was the name of Dov, I employed both names Dov/Khaldun in my arguments as it clearly foregrounded the focal conception in the article, undecidability.

### IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. *The Encounter*

The critical moment in the novella is the encounter between the parents and their twenty-year-lost son. Scene by scene, Kanafani portrays that moment and scene by scene it reveals a vortex of "Who am I?" for Dov/Khaldun. Before delving into the discussion, it is significant to show that the language of communication in the story between Dov/ Khaldun and Said X. is English, so Safiyya and Miriam cannot follow their eruptions of exchanges/ conversations. This creates a private atmosphere, or a third space, a neutral ground for each to display his thoughts and emotions under the cover of double estrangement and distance; maybe to reduce the impact of the whole situation's shock.

In the encounter between Dov/ Khaldun and his parents, the first image is that of a man, opposing the parents' image of the five-month baby. This man is not an ordinary person/ Jewish upbrought man; he is an Israeli soldier, "The tall man stepped forward: he was wearing a military uniform and carrying his military cap in his hand" (p. 178). The symbolism of his appearance is enough to shatter the parents and eliminate any hope of a *return*! The other shattering point is that Dov/Khaldun looks like his father Said X., that is why Miriam, Dov's/Khaldun's foster mother, recognizes the identity of her unexpected guests. The crack, here, between the Palestinian appearance of the man and his Jewish identity/ belonging represented semiotically through Dov's/ Khaldun's clothes highlights the reality for both sides, Dov/Khaldun, as being somewhere in between, and the parents, as having to 'cede' with any hope to restore their parental rights rendered as a mere biological belonging. Dov's/ Khaldun's reaction, "it seemed as if he had lost his self-confidence all at once" (p. 179) on seeing his biological father -and of course realizing the similarity between them- and gazing at his uniform, reveals the crack that happens inside him as being in a schizophrenic state of being. Dov/ Khaldun tries to gain his decisiveness and, instead of addressing them, he asks Miriam, "What did the two of them come for? Don't tell me they want to take me back?" (p. 179). Here, there is an incarnation between Dov/ Khaldun and the land as Kanafani aims at directing his critique to the Palestinians who escaped from their land thinking they would restore it somehow later.

The conversations between Said X. and Dov/ Khalun are symbolic of the confrontation between the true/ legal owner and the abandoned owned (a son/ a land/ a home). In a defensive attitude, Dov/ Khaldun puts a barrier between himself, of fear to be weakened/ appear weak, and Said X. "You are on the other side" (p. 180). This remark by Dov/ Khaldun shows the breach between them as strangers or more as enemies. Dov's/ Khaldun's acquired view of Arab as savages is reflected through asking Said X. to be civilized, "We need to talk like civilized people" (p. 181). It is clear that he does not mean himself of being non-civilized; he expresses his wish for them, the Palestinian 'strangers,' to upgrade their standard of thinking and behaving! Thus, and only then, Dov/ Khaldun implies that they can discuss or, as ironically suggested by Said X., *negotiate*, "Do you want to negotiate, or what?" (p. 181). But as the issue is clear for Dov/ Khaldun, what does he aim to negotiate? Is it his own identity? All in this setting are helpless in this regard and, as Kanafani implies, the fault is basically of the parents who escaped the attacks and left their newly born son alone! It is basically not Dov's/ Khaldun's ( the abandoned) fault !!

Through his speech, Kanafani uses Dov/ Khaldun to state the master statement in the novella, "After all, in the

## When Man is a Cause: The Undecidability of Belonging in Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*

final analysis, man is a cause” (p. 181). “Cause,” as a synonym of problem or issue, indicates a matter that can be verified as true or false. And its employment here demonstrates Kanafani's view that belonging is a flexible/ changeable not fixed or absolute issue! Dov/ Khaldun is left as a Palestinian child, but now he is the Jewish soldier. His Palestinian genes do not guarantee protecting him from the Jewish teachings he has been immersed in, with all its implications against the Palestinians. He cannot change a twenty-year upbringing just because those who had been his parents, for five months, had remembered him and simply come to *restore/ regain* him.

Said X.'s remark that, “we didn't find you, and I don't believe we will find you” (p. 182) shows his mixed feelings of anger and regret, maybe because of himself as it is his fault since the beginning. It represents a second time loss. And this loss here is of the son and its echoing to the land, loss of the land. On seeing the miserable condition of Dov/ Khaldun, Said X. feels satisfied, “we've lost him, but he's lost himself after all this. He'll never be the same as he was an hour ago” (p. 183) and attempts to attack/argue, “[...] man is a cause, not flesh and blood passed down from generation to generation” (186) Here, in front of Dov's/ Khaldun's silence, Said X. realizes the tragic situation he is in. That it is a homeland issue, not only a familial problem between father and son and that the only way to restore the lost rights is not through “a search for something buried beneath the dust of memories” (p. 187) as the mistakes of the past are and will be paid for by the likes of Said X., “I know now that I, too, paid with a son, in a strange way, but I paid him as a price... That was my first installment, and it's something that will be hard to explain” (p. 187). Said X.'s realization is accompanied by a hopeful reliance on the pure rightful patriotic efforts of the new generations, like his second son Khalid, whose “homeland is the future” (p. 187), on their land, Palestine. However, Said X. comprehends the lesson and starts to realize that Palestine is more than a son! Or is it a soothing remark to reduce the burden and the feeling of guilt? However, on leaving the house/ his house, Said X. admits that “every Palestinian is going to pay a price [for the loss of Palestine]” (p. 187) and he confirms addressing Miriam and Dov/ Khaldun that they can stay temporarily in *his house* as this issue/ cause needs a war to solve. Said X. understands that restoring Palestine is not as easy as the way it was/ had/ has been lost/ abandoned. This tragic encounter between a Palestinian father and a forever lost son shows the naked truth for both of them. Said X. realizes his fatal fault trying to soothe himself with his other children's potential. Dov's/ Khaldun's life afterwards will not be stable and the preach between his real identity and the acquired one is irrecoverable.

### **B. Predetermined/Artificial thoughts and points**

Throughout Dov's/ Khaldun's arguments with Said X., there are various indications that hint at the programmed teachings Dov/ Khaldun has received about the Palestinians. One of these indications has been mentioned earlier when he suggests arguing with Said X. as civilized people. Before he starts or resumes an argument, he “seemed to be trying to recall a long lesson learned by heart” (p. 181) and when interrupted, he couldn't continue until he silently revised the first part so as to continue/ resume it. Dov/ Khaldun, here, is trying to set his ideas rather than narrating his life story or justifying his being a Jew to the Palestinian *guests!* He blames them, his parents, of abandoning him and simply *run away* for twenty years!! Then he assures them of his militant mission and that he has not yet encountered the Palestinians face to face, but if he has to, he will do that because he *belongs here* that is to this side/ party, the *here* of the Jews, from their perspective, not the *here* of the Palestinians whose land has been confiscated treacherously and who passively submit. On the other side, he has no affection or intimacy towards them.

Regardless of the stark shocking truth implied in his speech, the undecidability of Dov/ Khaldun urges him to suddenly stand up facing Said X. as if he “at the head of some hidden army battalion” (p. 184). The state of pretension he lives in intensifies his bewilderment and reflects two contradictory Kanafanian impressions: about the whole Jewish state of pretension and about the Palestinians' (and all Arabs' and Muslims') passivity, “You're weak! Weak! Don't tell me you spent twenty years crying! Tears won't bring back the missing or the lost. Tears won't work miracles! [...] So, you spent twenty years crying. [...] Is this your dull, worn-out weapon?” (p. 185). These words defeat Said X. as they are again the stark truth.

### **C. Dov's/ Khaldun's shock**

Dov's/ Khaldun's shock is represented frequently semiotically although he tries to appear firm defending his Jewish state and attacking the passivity of his true parents and behind them all the Palestinians. His unstable reaction takes a declining curve, after standing, he sits down crumbled up on a chair and then cupping his head between his hands,

- 1) “The young man remained by the door, shifting his gaze among three of them, confused. [...] Slowly he took a step forward. His face changed color and it seemed he had lost his self-confidence all at once” (p. 179).
- 2) “The young man had withdrawn into himself in the chair, defeated” (p. 183).
- 3) “Dov remained seated, withdrawn” (p. 187). the three descriptions correspond with stages of Dov's/ Khaldun's internal dilemma and collapse though he tries his best to fight and argue. But finally,
- 4) “Dov was still withdrawn in his chair, holding his head between his hands” (p. 187).

So, once confronted with his real identity, Dov/ Khaldun is shown as a hollow being filled with kept-by-heart and undigested cliches which do not resist the pangs of his conscience as a Palestinian in the guise of a Jew. He is left shattered between these two realizations; the matter that leads to a state of undecidable zone of identity.

## When Man is a Cause: The Undecidability of Belonging in Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*

### V. CONCLUSION

Bewilderment and vortex of undecidable identity opens once Dov Iphrat Koshin, the Israeli soldier, knows he was born Khaldun Said, the Palestinian. His focus has been to defend himself against the urges of his roots (as a Palestinian) and the contradiction between it and his Jewish upbringing. However, Dov/ Khaldun cannot pretend more, his words show a defensive attitude whereas his semiotic behavior, crumbled upon himself, reflects the pain of the truth and that since then he will not be able to settle; his identity is undecidable between Israel/ Palestine, Zionists/ Palestinians, Colonizer/ Colonized, Judaism/ Islam... He vividly portrays how complex is the issue of Man. Dov's/ Khaldun's dilemma is symbolic of the land and its people, Palestine and the Palestinians. Kanafani provides a criticism of the *Self*, here. As the Palestinians of 1948 escaped from their homes forsaking their land to the foreign occupation and then doing nothing to restore it but waiting and weeping, Kanafani's self criticism is healthy as being the first step towards profoundly diagnosing the problem, the loss of Palestine, so as to find practical final solutions for the problem.

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