

Ghassan Kanafani in: “ The Land of the Sad Orange”

Ghassan Kanafani was born in Akka Palestine in 1936 and died, as a result of an Israeli bomb planted to his car on 8th July 1972. His Danish wife Annie, described the event saying: “...*We used to go shopping together every Saturday morning, on that day he accompanied his niece Lamees. A few minutes after they left, I heard the sound of a huge explosion. I ran but only saw remanence of our exploded small car. Lamees was a few meters away from the spot, but I could not find Ghassan. I hoped to find him injured, but I only found his left leg. I was devastated, and our son Fayez, started knocking his head against the wall. Little layla was crying: Baba...Baba...I gathered his remains, the Beirutie escorted him to his last resting place at the Shuhada Cemetery where he was buried next to Lamees who loved him and died with him*”¹

Kanafani is a prominent literary figure in the Arabic Literature and worldwide. His works were translated to many different languages. During his short life he enriched the Arabic library by with valuable collection of publications, varying from novel to short story to literary researches and political essays. “The Land of the Sad Orange” is one of his early stories that depicts the influence of the deportation on the Palestinians when the Israeli troops took over their country in 1948. In this story Kanafani mixes the artistic reality with the historical one. Though the story tells the suffering of a middle class family, it stands as an example of thousands of displaced families who had to suffer the humiliation of leaving their country and living in poverty, following the 1948 calamity that befell the Palestinians after the defeat of the Arab armies and the creation of the state of Israel

N. Habib

The Land of the Sad Orange

When we left Java to Akka, I felt no agony, it was like going from a city to another for a holiday. For several days, nothing painful happened, I was happy because this move gave me a nice break from school...things started to look different when Akka was attacked (by the Israeli troops). That night was hard on you and me. The women were praying, men were bitter and silent. You and me and all the kids of our age didn't understand what was going on...But that night we started to gather the threads of the story. When the Israeli soldiers left, after threatening and swearing, a big van stopped in front of our home, and few things (mainly beds and blankets) were thrown from here and there. I was standing with my back against the wall of the old house, when I saw your mother rise up to the van, then your aunt, then all the other little ones. Your father picked you up and threw you over the furniture, in the same way, he lifted me over his head and threw me in the iron box at the top of the van. There was your brother Riad sitting in silence. Before having myself settled properly, the car started moving and Akka started to fade little by little beyond the zigzag escalating road that led to a place called “Ra'ss-Ennakoura”²

The weather was somehow cloudy, a touch of cold chilled my body, Riad was sitting calmly placing his legs up, over the top of the box, holding his back to the furniture and staring toward the sky. I was sitting silent, holding my knees by my arms and putting my chin between my legs...All along the way there were orange groves. A sense of fear and anxiety were spreading over everyone ...The car was mounting with

difficulty over the wet soil, and from a distance, we heard the sound of gun shots as if greeting us farewell,

When “Ra’ss-Ennkoura” appeared, the car stopped...the women came down from among the belongings and went to a farmer who was squatting in front of a basket of oranges ...They carried the oranges, we heard them lamenting. At that moment I realised that orange is something precious...and these lovely big oranges are something dear to our hearts. The women bought the oranges and went back to the car and then your father left his place which was to the side of the driver, and stretched his arm, took an orange, stared on it silently, then burst out crying as a miserable small child.

In Ra’ss-Ennakoura, our car stopped among many other cars. The men started to give up their gun machines to the police officers who were there for that reason. When our turn came, the table was full of hand guns and automatic machines, and I saw the long line of the big cars enter Lebanon leaving faraway the land of orange...I started weeping in a loud sharp way...your mother was still looking in silence to the oranges...In your father’s eyes were the reflection of all the orange trees he had left behind for the Israelis ...all the clean orange trees he had planted one by one glittered in his face. He failed to stop the tears that filled up his eyes, when facing the police head officer.

When we reached Saida³, in the afternoon, we became refugees.

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The road absorbed us among many other things. Your father suddenly became older than before, he looked as if he didn’t sleep for a long time. He was standing among the belongings, which were thrown over the side of the road. I knew if I were to say any word he will burst to my face saying: “Damn your father...Damn you....These two swears were clear on his face. Even me, who was brought up in a catholic conservative school, at that moment, doubted that this God wants to make his people happy. I doubted that this God can hear and see everything ...All the coloured pictures that show God loves the children and smile for them looked like a lie among other lies made by those people who build conservative schools for the benefit of charging extra fees. I was sure that the God, we knew in Palestine, left Her as well and He is a refugee somewhere in this world, and that He is incapable of solving his own problems, and we, the refugees, who are sitting on the footpath of the road, are waiting a new destiny to find us a solution. We were responsible to find ourselves a solution ...we were responsible to find a roof over our heads. The pain started to strike the head of the naive young boy.

Night was awful, and the dark started to fall, bit by bit, I was frightened...thinking that I am going to spend the night on the pavement of the road, filled my spirit with dreadful nightmares...no one was there to calm me down...I couldn’t find any person to turn for...your father’s rigid silence raised more fear in my heart, and the oranges with your mother’s hand ignited fire in my chest...everyone was silent everyone was gazing to the black road hoping that some solution could rise from around the corner and take us to a certain roof. Then the destiny came...It was your uncle who came to the town few days earlier. He was our destiny.

Your uncle wasn't a man of real values, and when he found himself on the road, he became more savage. He went to a house where a Jewish family lived, opened the door, threw the content of the room away and cried to their face: "Go to Palestine". For sure they didn't go to Palestine, but, intimidated by his frustration and anger, they went to another room leaving him to enjoy a roof and a floor.

Your uncle led us to that room; we were heaped with his family and his belongings. We slept on the floor and were covered by the men's coats, In the morning, when we woke up, the men were still sitting on the chairs...and the tragedy started to penetrate through our bodies...all our bodies!!....

We didn't stay in Saida for a long, your uncle's room wasn't wide enough even for half of us. However we stayed there for three days. Your mother asked your father either to find himself a job or to return to the oranges. Your father exploded in her face. His voice was trembling with rage. Then our family problems had started. The happy, strong bounded family, stayed there with the groves of orange and the old house, and the martyrs.

I didn't know from where your father got the money. I knew that he had sold your mother's jewellery, which he had bought her once, to make her happy and proud of him. But the jewellery wasn't enough to solve our problems, there should be other resources. Had your father borrowed any money? Had he sell any belongings that he brought with him without letting us know!. I can't tell...But I still remember that we moved to a certain suburb of Saida, and there, your father sat on the high rock and smiled for the first time...He was waiting for the 15th of May to return with the victorious armies

The 15th of May came after a hard bitter period of time. Exactly, at twelve o'clock he nudged me with his foot while I was still sleeping, and said in a voice thundering with great expectation: get up, go see the Arab armies⁴ entering Palestine. I woke up frenzied and we ran bare footed, all along the hills, in the mid of the night, till we reached the street which was a full kilometre away from the village. All of us youngsters and elderly ran breathlessly like idiots. We saw the lights of the cars beaming from a distance, travelling towards "Ra'ss-Ennakoura". When we reached the main street, we felt the cold but your father's crazy shouting made us forget about everything ...He started to run after the cars like a small boy... He waved to them ...he shouted in a broken voice... he went out of breath but kept running after the cars like a small child...we ran beside him shouting like him and the admirable soldiers were looking toward us from under their helmets with silence and stiffness... We were all breathless, though your father kept running in spite of his fifty years of age. He was throwing cigarettes to the soldiers. He kept running and we kept following like a small herd of goats.

The procession of the cars vanished suddenly and we returned home tired and breathless. Your father went silent and speechless. When a passing car flashed its lights to his face, tears were spread all over his cheeks

After that day, life passed slowly...We were deceived by announcements...we were stunned by the bitter truth...Grimness started to invade the faces, your father found it difficult to talk about Palestine or the happy days in his orange groves, or his

houses... We were the walls of his tragedy and we were the vicious who discover easily the meaning beyond his shouting in the early morning: "go to the hill and never come back before noon..." We knew that he wanted to distract us from asking for breakfast.

Things began to deteriorate. Any simple issue was enough to ignite your father's anger. I remember when one of us asked him something and he jumped as if stricken by an electrical circuit, then moved his eyes among us. A damn idea stroked his mind. He stood as if finding a solution to his dilemma. Out of feeling that he is strong enough to end his tragedy, out of feeling the horror one feels before involving in a disastrous action, he started talking nonsense, he started turning around himself as if looking for something we couldn't see. Then he jumped to a box which we brought with us from Akka. He started spreading its contents in a hysterical, frightening way. In a moment, as if your mother, lead by motherly intuition, grasped what was going in his mind, she started to push us away from the house and asked us to run to the hill. Against her will, we stuck to the window, and stuck our little ears to its wood. Frightened, we heard your father saying: I will kill them and kill myself...I want to finish it ...I want to....I want...

We started peeping through the cracks of the door, we saw your father thrown on the ground breathing hardly, and gnawing his teeth. Your mother was watching him from a distance. Her face was full of horror.

At First I didn't understand what was going on. I remember that when I saw a black pistol laying to his side, I found myself running as fast as I could as if escaping a Phantom which appeared all of a sudden. I ran away towards the hill escaping the house....The more I found myself away from home the more I felt myself away from my childhood. I started to realise that our life is no more the same: things aren't simple as they used to be and life itself isn't some thing you eagerly look forward to. The situation had reached the edge of having a shot to the head as the only thing a father could offer his children. So from now and on, we have to watch our steps, behave ourselves, keep silent when father speaks about his problems, we should not ask for food no matter how hungry we went, we should show obedience by shaking our heads and smiling when father shout: "Go to hills and don't come back till noon.

In the evening when darkness had spread over the house your father was still there shaking with fever. Your mother was to his side. Our eyes were glistening like cat's eyes in the dark. Our lips were sealed as if they were never opened, as if they were the remnants of old injury,

We were heaped up there, withdrawn from our childhood, away from the land of orange...the orange that dies, as an old farmer told us, if a strange hand watered its trees.

Your father was still sick, thrown down on his bed, your mother was gnawing tragic tears that never left her eyes since that day.

I sneaked into the room as an outcast...when I saw your father's face quivering with broken rage...I had seen, in the same time that black pistol on the low table...near to it was the orange fruit...

The orange was wrinkled and dry

¹ More information could be found about the subject in Joussour, February 1999, p: 48-54)

² A Lebanese check point situates on the boarders between Lebanon and palestine

³ A main city in South Lebanon

⁴ Groups of Arab armies, from the surrounding countries, entered Palestine, that day, to defend its people against the Israeli Hagana Militias. Against all expectations, they were defeated and the Israeli state was announced

Translation, comments and notes
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