Poetics of commitment

Raḍwā ʿĀšūr reads Ġassān Kanafānī's fiction in *al-Ṭarīq ilā al-ḫayma al-uḫrā* ('The way to the other tent,' 1981) and *al-Ṭanṭūriyya* ('The woman from Tantoura,' 2010)

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This article aims discusses how Raḍwā ʿĀšūr (1946-2014), an Egyptian academic, novelist and activist, critically analyzed and subsequently intertextually engaged with the fiction of Palestinian author Ġassān Kanafānī in two works: the essay *al-Ṭarīq ilā al-ḫayma al-uḫrā* ('The Way to the Other Tent,' 1981) and her novel *al-Ṭanṭūriyya* (2010; translation: 'The Woman from Tantoura,' 2014).

I will highlight how the Palestinian author was a reference figure for Raḍwā ʿĀšūr in developing self-exploration and engaging with writing herself. ʿĀšūr's Third-Worldist and Marxist reading of Kanafānī allowed her to establish an intertextual dialogue with the iconic author of the Palestinian liberation struggle, which reemerges in her concept of writing and in certain narrative choices within *Al-Ṭanṭūriyya* (2010), which the author herself defines as her "Palestinian Novel". On the other hand, I will highlight how the critical essay on Kanafani's works also presents radical critiques of Kanafānī's works.

The intertextual dialogue between the two authors will be emphasized through Rancière's concept of "politics of literature" (Rancière 2011), which will be used to shed light on both ʿĀšūr understanding and criticism of literary modernism in Kanafānī's and her generational novel *al-Ṭanṭūriyya*.

Keywords: commitment in literature, Palestinian issue in Arabic novel, Raḍwā ʿĀšūr, Ġassān Kanafānī.

1. Raḍwā ʿĀšūr's relationship with writing and with Palestine

The Egyptian novelist, literary critic and academic Raḍwā ʿĀšūr (1946 - 2014)[1] spoke of her relationship with writing in several interviews and autobiographical speeches and papers. In a paper called *Taǧribatī*

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[1] Raḍwā ʿĀšur, author of novels, short stories and autobiographies, was also a literary critic with an interest in African, English, African American and Arab literature. She has written about Ġassān Kanafānī, Ḫalīl Ǧibrān and William Blake, among others. Herself subjected to Israeli and Egyptian politics, she found herself forced to live separately from her husband, the Palestinian poet Murīd Barġūṯī, for 17 years. ʿĀšur always supported the Palestinian cause, co-founding the National Anti-Zionist League and taking part in academic movements and demonstrations.

fī al-kitāba ('My Experience with Writing'),[2] the author places herself both within a global literary field and within the regional Egyptian cultural basin, laying claim to her own marginality on two levels:

> I am an Arab woman and a Third World citizen, and my heritage in both cases is stifled. I know this truth right down to the marrow of my bones, and I fear it to the extent that I write in self-defense and in defense of countless others with whom I identify or who are like me. I want to write because reality fills me with a sense of alienation. Silence only increases my alienation while confession opens me up so that I may head out toward the others, or they may come to me themselves (Ashour 1993: 170).

Raḍwā ʿĀšūr defines herself, first and foremost, as a female author, still in search of visibility in the male-dominated literary field of her country. She defines herself, secondly, as a 'Third World author,' namely as an author sharing the ideological backdrop of the international movement known as Third-Worldism. This movement encompassed the commitment to the economic development of the formerly colonized countries, challenging Western imperialism and capitalist models of development, and sharing with other Arab countries the call for a new international order at the height of the non-aligned movement's preeminence.

This definition was shared and claimed (from the 1950s through the 1980s) by several Egyptian and Arab authors. Yūsuf Idrīs, for example, devoted reflections and interviews to the role of the writer in the Third World, Naǧīb Maḥfūẓ claimed his place as 'Third World author' in his inaugural lecture for receiving the Nobel Prize in 1988[3]. Among women authors, Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī placed herself in the same category even in her final autobiographical works (2016: 36-38).

Coined in the 1950s in the geopolitical sphere (Berger 2004: 9-10), the term means a world movement aiming to assume a nonaligned position in the polarization between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, the expression 'third world' is a category that has spread to the cultural and literary spheres, including the Arab ones, especially after the Bandung conference (1955) where Egyptian leader Jamal Abdel Nasser played a key role. In this conference, the Egyptian leader joined some of the most prominent Third World Leaders of the time, as Tito of Yugoslavia, Prime Minister Nehr of India or Premier Chou En-Lai of China, and they worked to ensure a neutralist position for their country in the cold War context. As Adeed Dawisha emphasizes: "Nasir's words were treated by the other leaders as well as the media as representing not just Egypt, but the Arab World. When he spoke, he spoke with the confidence and demeanor of someone who knew that he had the Arb populations behind him" (Dawisha 2003: 166). Indeed, until he died in 1970, the Egyptian leader spread his influence in Egyptian and Pan-Arab terms, but also throughout the Third World (Berger 2004: 12-17 and Dawisha 2003: 167).

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[2] Conference at Cairo University held in April 1988. The speech was translated and published as "My Experience with Writing." See Ashour 1993.

[3] https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1988/mahfouz/lecture/ (last accessed August 14, 2024).

Beyond this geopolitical positioning, Raḍwā ʿĀšūr's definition likely also refers to the cultural sphere. Being a prominent academic, based at the Department of English Language and Literature in the Faculty of Arts at Ain Shams, her positioning may also be viewed as an answer to the transnational debate which, starting from the 1980s, surrounded the new structures of 'global literature' and the aesthetic and ideological qualities of "Third World Literature". In this debate, a key role was played by the well-known 1986 article by Fredric Jameson, 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,' published in the cultural studies journal 'Social Text,' which clearly resonated with the Arab world, as well (Salama 2014: 57-59).

In his famous article, Jameson postulates that Third World literatures share a key element: the concurrence of the past experiences of the main character and the nation's journey, in what he refers to as the 'national allegory' (Jameson 1988). This exclusive emphasis on the national ideology as the main provider of meanings and forms of the novel belonging to the so-called 'Third World' garnered reactions across multiple academic spheres. Indeed, the article was viewed as too deterministic and binary in its interpretation of the Goethian concept of 'Weltliterature.'[4] Describing themselves as "Third World citizens", ʿĀšūr, al-Sa'dāwī and Assia Djebar (Shohat 1994: 26) added complexity and plurality to Jameson's flat notion. Drawing on their feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial perspectives on the Global South, they highlighted the category's various 'limitations' and its usage in Western academia.

In a later work, ʿĀšūr openly identified with the Sixties Generation which—according to the author—suffered heavily during the Third Arab-Israeli War of 1967, maturing an "exceptional alertness to time and place" (Ashour 2000: 87). These positionings at a national and international level showcase ʿĀšūr's commitment to giving voice to underrepresented citizen categories - a stance that took shape and was further strengthened also thanks to the author's academic interests (she was granted a doctorate in Afro-American Studies from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst in 1975). For ʿĀšūr, who married Palestinian poet Murīd Barġūṯī in 1970 and is the mother of the popular poet Tamīm

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[4] Among others, Aijaz Ahmad claims that Jameson's theoretical concept makes the differences between the first and the third worlds absolute, placing the latter in a condition of "otherness" compared to the former, thus flattening the cultural diversity of the so-called "Third world" (Ahmad 1992: 96-104).

Barġūṯī, Palestine was a daily presence, a constant drive towards reflection and political action. Much of ʿĀšūr's writing intersects with the Palestinian issue. As noted by Zaynab al-Mansī, ʿĀšūr's narrative "blurs the lines between history and fiction" (al-Mansī 2016: 93) to restore the historical dimension of the multiplicity of experiences, daily lives and micro-stories of the people who have never before had representation. In her novel *Aṭyāf* (1999, 'Specters' 2010) ʿĀšūr employs for instance the literary motif of the double, following the lives of two women, Shajar and Raḍwā, who were born on the same day, to illuminate the Dayr Yasīn massacre (Ghazoul 2016: 94). Her more recent *al-Ṭanṭūriyya* (2010, 'The Woman from Tantoura,' 2014) is, instead, a generational depiction with epic features (Rahil 2016) wherein the experiences of Ruqayya, the 'woman from Tantoura' referred to in the title, intertwine with the history of dispossession and deprivation inflicted on the Palestinian people for over half a century. The opening pages of the novel provide a detailed and faithful reconstruction of the fate of the village of Ṭanṭūra which, attacked on the night of 22nd May 1948 by Jewish forces and depopulated, became the seat of one of the worst massacres of the *Nakba*[5].

The present article will analyse a work of literary criticism, *al-Ṭarīq ilā al-khayma al-ukhrā* ('The Way to the Other Tent'), finished in 1977[6] and published by Dār al-Adab in 1981. ʿĀšūr wrote it while she was also working on her first autobiographical project,[7] and facing an inner struggle on the idea of writing fiction. Indeed, in the autobiographical interview *Taǧribatī fī al-kitāba*, the author herself described how, following a failed attempt at a novel in 1976, her first writing project was an autobiography, which would become *al-Riḥla: ayyām ṭāliba miṣriyya fī Amrīkā* (1983, 'The Journey: An Egyptian Woman Student's Memoirs of America,' 2018), defined by the author herself as a "reconciliation with the idea of writing" (Ashour 1993: 170).

Al-Ṭarīq ilā al-ḫayma al-uḫrā (hereafter *al-Ṭarīq*) focuses on the work of Palestinian author, journalist and intellectual Ġassān Kanafānī (1936-1972), and engages with studies on literature from postcolonial nations and the Global South. Kanafānī is contextualized alongside figures such as Amilcar Cabral and Ernesto Guevara, and the narrative techniques in his novels, short stories and plays are analysed in conversation with both European and non-European literary modernism. Drawing extensively from numerous interviews given by the Palestinian author, as well as from his metatextual reflections frequently published in the press, ʿĀšūr constructs a study that has become an indispensable source for anyone critically examining Kanafānī's body of work over the past forty years.

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[5] For a detailed account of this massacre, see Pappé (2008: 167-168).

[6] Here I am basing myself on the introduction to the volume *al-Ṭarīq*, dated 1977.

[7] *al-Riḥla: ayyām ṭāliba miṣriyya fī Amrīkā* (1983, 'The Journey: an Egyptian Woman Student's Memoirs of America,' 2018).

The text offers multiple levels of interpretation: on the one hand, it is an essential tool for understanding Kanafānī's central role within Arab and Palestinian discourse, while also revealing the author's positions within both the national and international literary fields and capturing her own developmental journey and "relationship" with writing.

This article examines ʿĀšūr's analysis of literary modernism in the fiction of the renowned Palestinian writer, leading into the Egyptian author's critique of the iconic figure of Umm Sa'd, interpreted in *al-Ṭarīq* through a gendered perspective. The article's final section shifts focus from the critical text *Al-ṭarīq* to the aforementioned novel *al-Ṭanṭūriyya* ('The Woman of Tantoura,' 2010), which not only thematizes the historical figure of Kanafānī, but also incorporates his 1972 assassination by the Mossad into its plot.

2. Between history and biography: ʿĀšūr's portrait of Kanafānī

In *al-Ṭarīq* ʿĀšūr adopts an internal perspective to narrate Kanafānī's life, opening her essay with an anecdote about Kanāfānī's youth in the UNRWA refugee school for Palestinian children in Damascus. At just seventeen years old, Kanāfānī was an elementary school teacher tasked with a drawing lesson, in line with the official curriculum, and asked the children to draw an apple and a banana (Riley 2000: 3-4). Suddenly, young Kanāfānī realised that the children in the camp had never seen an apple or a banana, so he decided instead to have them draw the refugee camp. Later, the Palestinian author described this event as a "decisive turning point" (Riley 2000: 4) in his life, as it marked his awakening to the harsh reality faced by Palestinian refugees, especially children, forced to live in deprivation and stripped of fundamental human rights.

By beginning her essay with this 'awakening to reality' anecdote, ʿĀšūr profiles an author whose thematic, stylistic and professional choices are driven, first and foremost, by a clear-sighted understanding of reality. She notes how Kanāfānī remained committed throughout his life as a journalist and writer to the 'ethical choice' he made at that school in Damascus, learning from the insights provided by his early teaching experience in the refugee camps. In Kanāfānī's literary works, artistic creation arises from observation and connection with reality. Additionally, as ʿĀšūr comments, he adhered to the "decision not to arbitrarily separate the teacher's role from the child's reaction" (ʿĀšūr 1981: 16), taking on his role as an educator in a substantive way—an invaluable commitment when the nation and its institutions were absent.

In recounting the biography of the Palestinian author, from the trauma of losing his family home in Acre at the age of thirteen, to his youth as a refugee in Damascus, through to his assassination on July 8, 1972 and the mass funeral that followed, the author draws a parallel between Kanāfānī's personal and family story and that of the entire Palestinian people. Considering the Kanafānī family's experience as an epitome of Palestinian history, ʿĀšūr reflects on a less-represented theme in *Nakba* historiography: the loss of social status brought on by dispossession and exile. "In exile, Kanāfānī learned the link between national and class issues" (ʿĀšūr 1981: 22), and his subsequent exiles, including his time in Kuwait, were experienced with an awareness of the psychological toll of seeking economic recovery (ʿĀšūr 1981: 23). Before exile, the Kanafānī family led a quiet life: his father was a lawyer, and young Ġassān, like many middle-class children of the time, attended a French missionary school in Palestine. The loss of their home and their subsequent exile forced the family into the painful shift from middle-class status to that of underprivileged refugees.

According to ʿĀšūr, this personal experience is reflected in both novellas like *al-Ṣaġīr yaḏhab ilā al-ḫayma (*'The Little One Goes to the Camp,' 1967), where the author describes life under threat from a "new enemy in exile, fiercer than the British or Zionist enemy" (ʿĀšūr 1981: 41)—namely, poverty—and in *Riǧāl fī al-šams* ('Men in the Sun,' 1963; English translation 1967), which became an instant classic of Palestinian literature as well as a foundational text in the field of "forced migration narrative" (Censi and Paniconi 2024: 439).[8] The biographical section closes with an account of Kanāfānī's work as an editor for various Arab publications, including *al-Ḥurriyya* (1963-1970), the journal of the Arab Nationalist Movement; *al-Muḥarrir* (1963-1967); *al-Anwār* (1967–1969) and *al-Hadaf* (1969), for which he served as director. From these journal platforms, Kanāfānī reflected on the intersections of national liberation and class struggle, questioning the role of the intellectual and asserting the necessity—similar to the views of Amilcar Cabral and Ernesto Guevara, as noted by ʿĀšūr (1981: 27)—of transcending the 'local' dimension of the national struggle to embrace its international aspect. "At first," Kanafānī wrote, "I spoke of Palestine as a matter unto itself, of the children in refugee camps [...] as if they were purely Palestinian problems. Then I came to see Palestine as a symbol of humanity as a whole: when I write about a Palestinian family, I am writing about a human experience" (Kanafānī quoted in ʿĀšūr 1981: 28). By framing Kanafānī as a 'Third World author' (ʿĀšūr 1981: 88), ʿĀšūr highlights his transnational and global dimension while continuing to trace within his work an ongoing intertwining of national history with private experiences. In this light, both the author and the land he depicted, Palestine, become a universal image of exile, the struggle for national liberation and the re-creation of identity and 'home' within the diasporic context.

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[8] This novella tells the tragic story of three Palestinians that turn to a smuggler to cross the border between Iraq and Kuweit, looking for jobs and opportunities there after the *Nakba*, the Palestinian catastrophe. The men choke to death in the water tank of the truck where they had hidden to cross the border, which turns into an oven under the scorching desert sun.

Āšūr identifies a recurring narrative core in Kanafānī's work: the portrayal of the pivotal moment when a family transitions from their comfortable daily life to the status of 'refugee family.' This theme is seen, for example, in *Arḍ al-burtuqāl al-ḥazīna* ('The Land of Sad Oranges,' 1962), which depicts a Palestinian family forced to flee their village by car, transitioning to refugee status after a short drive. Kanāfānī captures every detail of the car's journey from the family's home to the *manfā*, or place of exile, located just a few kilometers away: "By the time we reached Sidon that afternoon, we were refugees." ʿĀšūr isolates and analyses the behavioral and psychological elements that Kanāfānī effectively introduces in his narrative to convey the impact of the *Nakba* on an ordinary Palestinian family: the father's frustration, the children's hunger and the fractures that emerge within the family after trauma (ʿĀšūr 1981: 39), stripping the adult of dignity and the children of the right to childhood. The impact of these historical traumas on the characters, their emotional sphere and their relational capacities is, as we will see, taken up by ʿĀšūr herself in her generational novel *al-Ṭanṭūriyya* (al-Mansī 2016: 98).

3. Political use of literary modernism in Kanafānī

With *Arḍ al-burtuqāl al-ḥazīna*, ʿĀšūr begins her critical examination of the literary modernism techniques employed by the Palestinian writer. According to her, a primary element worth highlighting is how the theme of the *Nakba* and its consequent suffering derives strength from paradox, of which the story offers poignant examples (ʿĀšūr 1981: 51). The story takes place in May, at the height of spring—a metaphor for resurrection and the land's renewal, a latent vitality even amid adversity. This condition, which ʿĀšūr interprets as symbolising a 'spring of the homeland,' suggests the hope stirred by the 1936 revolts, which ʿĀšūr discusses in historical detail (ʿĀšūr 1981: 19), making the loss of land all the more catastrophic and historically unacceptable.

Significant attention is given to analysing the narrative strategies in the novel *Riǧāl fī al-šams (*'Men in the Sun and other Palestinian Stories,' 1963; English translation 1978) which, according to ʿĀšūr, adopts the structure of the pre-modern Arabic travel narrative genre, *riḥla* (ʿĀšūr 1981: 59), while adapting this classical framework and incorporating modernist narrative techniques influenced by Faulkner. Themes of loss, alienation, and the pursuit of social and economic redemption—which, however, expose the individual to a state of "psychological thirst" (ʿĀšūr 1981: 23)—are presented here. ʿĀšūr analyses the characters in the order of their appearance, emphasizing how each contributes to a polyptych of fragmented, deadly Palestinian reality. The world of *Riǧāl fī al-šams* is indeed one in which human beings are treated as objects, marriages fall apart or are formed for convenience, and the bodies of the three protagonists—united on their journey toward death—embody the tragedy and inevitability of identity loss.

ʿĀšūr pauses to examine the novel's ironic-paradoxical structure (*mufāraqa sāḫira*, ʿĀšūr 1981: 56) in this tragic work, where the moment of arrival—symbolically foreshadowed throughout the text and the main characters' dialogues—coincides with that of death. Driving this rush towards the end is a profoundly dehumanised character, Abu al-Ḫayzurān, a smuggler who has lost his masculinity in battle and now he focuses solely on 'earning money, money, money.' The three refugees entrust their savings to this man, who has "turned into a rat from utter despair," in hopes of escaping from hell (ʿĀšūr 1981: 55). This too is a paradox, concealing the essence of a Palestinian tragedy: a people deceived into believing they can organise their salvation on an individual basis.

ʿĀšūr notes that the novel is also constructed through the interaction of opposing images: on the one hand, the desert and the cistern (evoking hell, unbearable heat); on the other, the oasis (does it really exist, or is it a mirage?) representing individual salvation, achievable only through "torture" (ʿĀšūr 1981: 68)—the suffering deliberately inflicted by one person upon another. According to ʿĀšūr, the novel's structure, starting from three distinct scenes and then bringing together the narrative in the "journey" towards death, gives depth and complexity to the story. Palestine is thus conveyed not through a single character but, rather, through three characters of different generations, engaged in complex relationships (ʿĀšūr 1981: 82). In this regard, we may argue, Kanafānī succeeds where others have failed: he manages to narratively portray a defeat that is at once personal, generational, and collective.

According to ʿĀšūr, the adaptation of the 'classic' genre of *riḥla*, combined with various modernist narrative techniques, allows the author to encode the Palestinian world in its relational, psychological, and material dynamics. From this perspective, *Riǧāl fī al-šams* is a 'political text' insofar as it reveals (or, through the structure of *mufāraqa sāḫira*, veils to reveal) the degradation of family, friendship, political and professional relationships in a society condemned to clandestine escape to improve its status. Thus, even though Kanafānī is the foremost theorist of Palestinian literature as inherently committed literature[9], his novels are not political texts in that they convey ideas or political proposals; they are so by their literary effectiveness. In 'The Politics of Literature,' J. Rancière explains what it means for a literary text to be 'political:' it is unrelated to public 'engagement' of writers or socially, politically, or ethically charged content. According to Rancière, there is a link between politics as a form of collective practice and literature as a historically, ideologically and culturally determined form of expression. Therefore, novels, poetry, romance and memoirs are inherently political writings, even when they don’t discuss politics, to the extent that they can autonomously construct their own horizon of meaning and values. Moreover, according to Rancière, modernist literature, in particular, has taken on the task not of ‘representing’ reality but, rather, of ‘creating’ an autonomous reality through language, imagery, and sound (Rancière 2011: 6-7). *Riǧāl fī al-šams* fully aligns with Rancière’s concept of the political nature of literary texts and, as ʿĀšūr demonstrates through her analysis of modernist symbolism in the novel (ʿĀšūr 1981: 64-69), exemplifies the ‘political’ vocation of literary modernism.[10] Kanafānī himself writes the following about his attitude towards writing:

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[9] See in particular Kanafānī 1968 (32-33), where the author explains how art and culture are two key factors in the building of a nation.

> My political position springs from my being a novelist. Insofar as I am concerned, politics and the novel are an indivisible cause and I can categorically state that I became politically committed because I am a novelist, not the opposite. I started writing the story of my Palestinian life before I formed a clear political position or joined any organisation (Wild 1975: 12).

This imaginative force is the same that, according to ʿĀšūr, Kanafānī bestows upon his child protagonists in his novellas, such as the young protagonist in *al-Munzaliq* (ʿĀšūr 1981: 47). ʿĀšūr notices how, rather than falling into pity, the story grants the poor, refugee child the power of speech. Thus, the young protagonist does not feel defined by his ‘refugee’ status but is, instead, able to open himself to the multiplicity of narration, constantly reinventing his identity.

The second modernist text ʿĀšūr analyses is *Mā tabaqqā lakum*[11] (1966; ‘All That’s Left to You. A Novella and Short Stories,’ 2004), which Wen-chin Ouyang compares to another premodern form, that of the *qaṣīda*, or pre-Islamic ode: “Structurally, the novel contains three major parts of the classical Arabic *qaṣīda:* departure, journey and arrival. It begins with Ḥāmid’s departure; rather, his plunge into the desert at dusk, and ends with events taking place at the edge of the desert at dawn, a journey similar to that of ‘Antara who traversed the desert in one night between dusk and dawn as a hero must do” (Ouyang 1988: 224). Ouyang’s intuition is partially anticipated by ʿĀšūr’s reading. According to the latter indeed, Kanafānī combines foundational and structural elements from classical Arabic literature with modernist literary techniques, particularly the heavy use of stream of consciousness (*tayyār al-*

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[10] ʿĀšūr highlights, for example, the importance of symbolic elements that reference each other constantly: among them, the cistern (shelter/tomb for the protagonists) and the desert environment, also described in contrasting terms (as an escape route and deathly expanse).

[11] Published in1966, this novella tells the story of a brother and sister, Ḥāmid and Maryam, who live in a refugee camp following the loss of their home and family during the *Nakba*.

waʿī) and the expansion or contraction of space and time, making this text one of the most experimental in Arabic literature of its time (ʿĀšūr 1981: 88).

ʿĀšūr's analysis highlights the symbolic significance of the main character Ḥāmid's movement as he leaves Gaza and crosses the desert at the beginning of the novel. "From what is Ḥāmid distancing himself?"—ʿĀšūr asks. What world is he leaving behind? According to the Egyptian author, it is a world trapped in the past, filled with loneliness (*ǧadb*), frustration (*iḥbāṭ*) and sterility (*ʿaǧz*) (ʿĀšūr 1981: 75). All these elements belong to the realm of the past, symbolised by the wall clock in Ḥāmid's room, which ʿĀšūr interprets as a metaphor for the 'time of loss.' The author reads not so much the ticking of the clock, about which many have written but, rather, the "silence" (a symbolic element in itself, alluding to Palestinian impotence) that makes the ticking—the clear marker of passing time—audible and unbearable. In discussing this novel, ʿĀšūr does not overlook intertextuality and the novel's debt to Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, which uses the same symbolic clock element (Azouqa 2000). ʿĀšūr includes Kanafānī's own words on this influence: "It's true. I am very influenced [by Faulkner], but *Mā tabaqqā lakum* is not a mechanical imitation of Faulkner. Rather, it is an attempt to employ the aesthetic means and artistic tools developed by him" (Kanafānī quoted byʿĀšūr 1981: 85, my translation).

After an extensive discussion of the clock symbol, which in both novels refers to the protagonist's relationship with past time, ʿĀšūr concludes that Faulkner's influence is merely formal (*ta'aṯṯur šaklī*, ʿĀšūr 1981: 85) and that Kanafānī's text constructs its meanings autonomously.

In *Mā tabaqqā lakum*, time itself is a character. It appears in dual forms: as an objective phenomenon (the ticking) and as an individual expression of each character's 'internal time'—distinct and dissonant from the objective narrative time (Newman 2019). According to ʿĀšūr, this manipulation of time allows each character to transcend "the boundaries of individual landscape" (ʿĀšūr 1981: 77). Space also undergoes similar manipulation: the sun-scorched landscape crossed by Ḥāmid is both 'space' and a metaphor for the Palestinian people's collective journey towards the future (ʿĀšūr 1981: 83-84). After analysing this experimental text, ʿĀšūr devotes significant attention to Kanafānī's metaliterary reflections on the use of such modernist techniques:

> [*Mā Tabaqqa Lakum*] raised a question within me [Kanafānī]: Who am I writing for? Am I writing to receive a positive review in a magazine, or am I writing to reach people and create a form of culture within society, where intellectuals have the duty to engage with people? [...] I'm more interested in reaching the reader than in a "form" (ʿĀšūr 1981: 87; my translation).

According to ʿĀšūr, the question posed by the Palestinian writer and ideologue—whether it is possible to reconcile the quality of a text, including attention to detail and formal research, with its accessibility and circulation—is an issue shared with other Third World writers who must reach the masses without compromising their chosen forms and methods (ʿĀšūr 1981: 87). In *Mā tabaqqā lakum*, for instance, the extensive use of stream of consciousness serves to "represent man's isolation within the world and the loss of trust in an objective reality," as in Joyce or Woolf (ʿĀšūr 1981: 88). In the subterranean dialogue established with the author, and as if responding to the question he poses to himself, ʿĀšūr suggests that while the stream of consciousness is effective in depicting individual alienation, it may be less effective in expressing *Tajārub al-umma*, a collective, 'national' experience (ʿĀšūr 1981: 88). Anticipating Jamesonian theory (her book was published in 1981, five years before Jameson's article), ʿĀšūr is concerned with expressing a 'national self,' sensing this expression as a priority for the author, and concludes that, in her opinion, the stream of consciousness style may not be suited for this purpose (ʿĀšūr 1981: 88).[12]

4. From criticism of the character of Umm Sa'd to the creation of Ruqayya

ʿĀšūr also analyses the novella *Umm Sa'd* and its eponymous character, a mother who 'gives' her children to the revolution. Āšūr contextualizes this woman's figure without succumbing to the allure of the political ideology she embodies, focusing instead on the construction of the literary artifact as a creator and repository of political ideology. Umm Sa'd is, in fact, a character inspired by a real woman, a cousin of the actual author: a revolutionary woman, mother of two sons who joined the armed struggle for Palestinian liberation, who became well-known in the collective imagination for her public stances. Umm Sa'd is, precisely, the 'mother of Sa'ad,' a young man fighting among the *fidā'iyīn*. Unlike Abū Qays in *Riğāl fī al-šams*, who never sees his wish to plant a new olive tree—a symbol of his new life in Kuwait—fulfilled, the vine of Umm Sa'd grows lush and firmly rooted, making her a "simple and resolute woman, poor but proud" (D'Afflitto 1984: 37; my translation) in this tale of resistance.

Structurally adventurous, the novella lacks a true plot, relying instead on nine juxtaposed narrative tableaux (*lawḥāt*) in which Umm Sa'd dialogues with the author himself. Umm Sa'd is a simple woman who washes clothes in exchange for small change in the refugee camp. Nevertheless, she 'sees'the historical moment and draws strength from her vision, not due to any particular education or experience, but from a kind of instinct. Her home is muddy and she lives with a violent husband who takes out his frustrations on her, yet she finds pride in her children who left for the armed struggle.

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[12] Special mention must be made of 'Āšūr's criticism of the short story *al-'Ā'id ilā Ḥaifa* ('Return to Haifa'), which today appears as an isolated voice on the Arab critical scene: indeed, the Egyptian author points out formal criticism of a book acclaimed as a masterpiece by scholars and the general audience. Specifically, the author claims that the story presents characters that embody a mere narrative function rather than being complete.

ʿĀšūr creates for her the category of a "symbolic-realist character" (ʿĀšūr 1981: 124) because she embodies both the harsh daily life of the camp and broader aspirations and ideals. ʿĀšūr dissects the iconography of this *fidā'iyīn* mother: the amulet made from a bullet that Umm Sa'd wears symbolises a society forced to reinvent itself, to transform its relationship with material culture (ʿĀšūr 1981: 129) and the very concept of an 'amulet' to adapt to the catastrophic events that have befallen it. Umm Sa'd is a character designed to resemble all ordinary women who work hard and endure disrupted family dynamics, while simultaneously serving as a reification of Palestine. It is noteworthy how ʿĀšūr recognizes the author's skill in "avoiding the mistake often made by Third World authors associated with liberation movements for their countries, who create idealised images of the worker, glorifying the people's culture, their social and cultural models, as if that culture were a fixed and static reality" (ʿĀšūr 1981: 126). Finally, a bold gender analysis of this character is proposed: who is Umm Sa'd, beyond being a Palestinian mother? What does the text reveal about her identity? ʿĀšūr highlights how the character is, in fact, excluded from the dynamic reality around her, confined to a rigid narrative in which she is left only the role of labourer and the function of mother. This is a radical and courageous critique, aimed at a female figure that has dominated—and continues to dominate—Palestinian literary imagination.

In 2010, thirty years after the publication of *al-Ṭarīq* and now beyond the doubts that once led her to question whether fiction writing was within her reach, ʿĀšūr published the generational novel *al-Ṭanṭūriyya*. The author reconstructs with historical rigor and detail the siege and massacre that took place in Ṭanṭūra in May 1948 (al-Mansī 2016: 94-97), using both written and oral historical sources (Nashef 2022: 579-580) and entrusting the character of Ruqayya with the role of reluctant witness and narrator of her family's history. Who is Ruqayya? She is an ordinary woman, displaced from Ṭanṭūra in 1948 (in the narrative, she is now in her seventies) who first sought refuge in Beirut, then in the Gulf after the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War, and finally in Alexandria, representing through her experiences a history of dispossession and exile spanning four generations. Urged by her youngest son Ḥasan—a scholar specializing in oral history—to record her memories in a notebook, Ruqayya becomes the narrator of her family's story and lost places, contributing to building a Palestinian literary landscape (Sibilio 2013: 140-144), in which words are re-tracing and re-shaping lost historical landmarks. The result is an intense pseudo-memoir, where letters from friends or relatives contribute "external" perspectives alongside those of the protagonist and narrator.

Given her age at the time of the *naksa*, Ruqayya is a near-contemporary of Umm Sa'd from a historical perspective, though in literary terms she is undoubtedly the daughter of Kanafānī's courageous mother of fighters, and reflects both continuity and discontinuity with her. If resilience is a common trait in both women's lives, a point of divergence lies in their relationship with words. Ruqayya is a reluctant narrator, repeatedly admitting throughout the novel the difficulty and impossibility of narration:

> [Hasan] said, "If I weren't confident in your ability I wouldn't burden you by asking."
> I said decisively, "I don't know how."
> I refused, but I couldn't get the thought out of my head. It stayed with me like a disagreeable guest who doesn't want to leave. I said to myself: I can't and I don't want to. Years later Hasan once again began to insist. Then one evening he surprised me with a large notebook, on the cover of which he had written "al-Tantouriyya." The woman from Tantoura (Ashour 2014: 163).

Ruqayya experienced the trauma of exile and the sight of her father's and brothers' bodies among piles of corpses outside the village during the *Nakba* when she was just twelve years old. Her way of surviving this shock was through silence—a silence to which she returns cyclically whenever new conflicts, such as the Lebanese Civil War, endanger her life. Furthermore, Ruqayya lacks the broad perspective or intuition of Umm Sa'd in her diasporic experience. Unlike Umm Sa'd, the protagonist of *al-Ṭanṭūriyya* seems almost incapable of consciously navigating her emotional life (al-Mansī 2016: 101). Unlike Umm Sa'd, Ruqayya represents not so much a political vision as the collective fate of those who have endured historical traumas, devoid of heroism, yet forced into the experiences of exile,[13] change (al-Mansī 2016: 96-97),[14] waiting and the reconstruction of a sense of home in exile (Al Salibi 2023). However, Ruqayya's selective silence, as argued by Hamdi, "can turn into a mode of survival and resistance" (Hamdi 2023: 154), in a model of resistance that seems opposed to the vocal and brave Umm Sa'd, but is a precious resource when the narration encounters the unspeakable, and the unthinkable, as in the case of the massacres of Sabra and Shatila.

5. Kanafānī's memory in *al-Ṭanṭūriyya*

A distinctive feature of ʿĀšūr's novel is the inclusion of real-life figures of the Palestinian social, political and cultural scene within the plot; they interact with the fictional characters, adding an element of verisimilitude to the story (Rahil 2016: 130). Among these figures are ʿArafāt, the cartoonist Najī al-ʿĀlī and, notably, Kanafānī himself, of whom Faḍl al-Naqīb said: "wrote the Palestinian history, then he was written by it." This is precisely what happens in *al-Ṭanṭūriyya*, where Kanafānī first appears as the author of *Arḍ al-burtuqāl al-ḥazīna*, a work Ruqayya recalls reading, and later as an iconic figure of Palestinian resistance, in the tragic scene foreshadowing his assassination. In Ruqayya's words, one can discern the echo of the critical essay penned by ʿĀšūr twenty years earlier:

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[13] Ruqayya and her family network ranging across Lebanon, Gulf countries, Egypt and all the way to Canada are a fitting example of the Palestinian diaspora.

[14] Ruqayya's mother suffers from selective blindness that occurs as a defence mechanism. Despite her condition, the woman finds an unfamiliar strength after the *Nabka*. Just like Ruqayya, who seeks refuge in silence after seeing the bodies of her father and brother among the fallen of the Ṭanṭūra massacre, shows great resilience as other historical events—such as the Lebanese Civil War—will involve her family.

> I had read one short story by Ghassan Kanafani that had fallen into my hands by chance, when we were in Sidon. I didn't remember anything of the story other than one line: "When we arrived in Sidon, in the evening, we became refugees." Who said that, and in what context? I don't remember. The expression kept ringing in my ears for days and nights, as if it were a line of poetry (Ashour 2014: 112).

The narrative strikes Ruqayya deeply because it resonates within her, a 13-year-old girl, recalling the car journey from 'home' to *Manfā* (the place of exile) as rendered in prose by Kanafānī—an autobiographical reflection of the author's own experiences. The novel also incorporates the reading of *Riǧāl fī al-šams* into the plot:

> I read it in one night: a novel about three Palestinians, a boy, a young man, and an older man, trying to get to Kweit smuggled in an empty water tanker. The border guard delays the truck and the three die of suffocation inside the tank. The driver delivers them to their death, even though he wants to help them. The borders killed them. I didn't read anything else of Ghassan's, neither books or articles, and I didn't follow the magazine where he was editor-in-chief; but Ezz [Ruqaya's brother-in-law] knew him personally and talked about him with great admiration (Ashour 2014: 112).

The concept of the 'killing border' is reinterpreted and inverted in the final scene of *al-Ṭanṭūriyya*, which ends with an encounter between Palestinians from various regions of Lebanon, historical Palestine, and the diaspora "across barbed wire" (Ashour 2014: 353), at the border. Though unclear whether this is a deliberate reference to Kanafānī's text, it is evident that the author is engaging with many key elements of Kanafānī's narrative (the border, the 'mother of fighters,' the exile), at times aligning her realizations with or distancing them from the Palestinian author's models and choices. For instance, at the end of her novel, the Egyptian author deliberately gives another connotation to the border, where the 'closure' of the generational circle takes place, with the main character passing on the key to the home left in Ṭanṭūra to her granddaughter, 'little Ruqayya' (Raḥīl 2016: 146). The final instance featuring Ġassān Kanafānī follows closely on the heels of the reference to *Riǧāl fī al-šams* and portrays his death:

> I remember the day clearly, it was in July, Beirut was like fire and the humidity was suffocating. the boys went to Shatila to participate in a Summer Program. I said goodbye to them in the morning, repeating to them: It's very hot today. Walk in the shade and drink water whenever you can. Otherwise, you'll get sunstroke".
>
> After one hour or less young Abed rang the doorbell like a crazy person. He rang it continuously as if he couldn't wait. When I opened it he burst inside the house. Saying: They have assassinated Kanafani. He left his house and got into his car, he turned the key and the car blew up with him and his niece" (Ashour 2012: 113).

This literary reconstruction of Kanafānī's assassination at the hands of the Mossad, which took place in Beirut on July 9, 1972, is in itself a tribute to the iconic Palestinian author, whose influence extends far beyond the 'boundary' imposed by his murder. ʿĀšūr proceeds by subtraction. Silencing the academic Raḍwā's voice, the author lets Ruqayya speak. And despite—or perhaps because of—the "limited" perspective of her character's personal experience, the author sheds light on the reality of a population along the twists and turns of History, spanning four generations.

6. Conclusion

In the final chapter of her novel *al-Ṭanṭūriyya*, ʿĀšūr appears to allude once again to another work by Kanafānī—the seminal novel 'Men in the Sun'—by setting her final scene 'Across the Barbed Wire.' However, she places this element not in a context of death, as in Kanafānī's 1963 masterpiece, but rather in a scene of joyful reunion between Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Palestinians from the occupied territories. This moment takes place during the Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in 2000, achieved thanks to the efforts of Hezbollah's Lebanese resistance forces. In this scene, the names of Palestinian coastal villages erased during the *Nakba* circulate from mouth to mouth and are presented as virtual identity cards by the Palestinians crowded around the barbed wire. To the traditional function of 'remembrance' exercised through the mention of the lost geography (Sibilio 2013: 168), this scene also adds the function of a true generational transition, which materially unfolds around a barbed wire marked by the names of destroyed villages, belonging to a past temporal dimension.

In this border setting the elderly Ruqayya unexpectedly sees her namesake granddaughter on the other side of the barrier, arriving from Canada. In this moment, she hands over the key to the family home in Ṭanṭūra, symbolizing the continuity of the struggle across generations. This generational transmission at the border, intended to reaffirm the persistence of the Palestinian people and memory over time, also counterbalances the generational tensions present in Kanafānī's prose, often caused by parental abandonment, disappointment in parents, or disappearance. As Hamdi (2023: 159) has also noted, ʿĀšūr's novel features numerous rewritings—sometimes even contrasting—of Kanafānī's work, reinforcing her literary contribution to the construction of a trans-national Palestinian literary landscape.

From both the critical essay *al-Ṭarīq ilā al-ḫayma al-uḫrā* and the intertextual dialogue that the author engaged with the same writer in *al-Ṭanṭūriyya*, we see how ʿĀšūr adopts the ability to 'capture reality' so highly valued in Kanafānī ('Ašūr 1981: 178-179). The Egyptian author thus reclaims the idea of writing as political commitment that permeates Kanafānī's works, a concept allowing the Palestinian 'human cause' to be embraced as a lens through which to interpret global conditions of subordination, deterritorialization and the deprivation of rights.

From this perspective, both Kanafānī's narrative, which employs techniques of introspection and the expansion of time and space typical of transnational modernism to give voice to the inner lives of his Palestinian characters, and ʿĀšūr's generational historical novel, inspired by oral history and the documentary novel model, position themselves within the territory of 'political literature,' in Rancière's terms. In this way, ʿĀšūr's 'militant literary criticism' merges with her work as a novelist, reactivating—through literary re-encoding—the multifaceted universe of fractures and traumas, as well as the continuities and resilience within the stories of Palestinian men and women.

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