A STUDY OF RIJAL Fî AL-SHAMS
BY GHASSÂN KANAFÂNÎ

Rijâl fî al-Shams by Ghassân Kanafânî is a short novel dealing with the Palestinian people's search for identity in a hostile world that has denied them their existence. The work expresses the disaster (Arabic: al-Nakba) that has resulted from ineffective leadership, false hope and cruel circumstances. Ghassân Kanafânî—a Palestinian Arab—has opened several windows upon the scene of this disaster by composing a fictional account of a few days in the life of a group of four companions who live a brief drama in the desert between Basra and Kuwait.

The author provides the characters and sets the stage after which he allows the events to unfold to their conclusion. The plot is straightforward; three men representative of three generations: Abû Qais, the old man, As'ad, the young man, and Marwân, the youth appear upon the stage. Each individual is in the process of escaping across the desert from Jordan to Kuwait in search of a better life free from the bitterness of the past and bright with promises for a secure future. They arrive separately at Basra in Iraq and are submerged in its crowds of people as they search for a smuggler who will convey them illegally into Kuwait. Each one meets an agent known to us only as "The Fat Man" who demands a price above that which they can afford to pay. However their hopes of escape are raised anew by Abû Khairzarâh who offers to take them surreptitiously across the border posts into Kuwait inside his empty water tanker truck. They four men agree upon the conditions of the undertaking and begin their journey. In order to cross the border posts the three men, who are illegal aliens in the eyes of the law, have to hide in the closed water tank while Abû Khairzarâh performs the crossing formalities for himself and his supposedly empty vehicle. Events move along smoothly at the Iraqi crossing where the men have to wait seven minutes inside the oven-like tank. However a long delay at the Kuwaiti post caused by the officials' refusal to sign Abû Khairzarâh's papers results in the tragic deaths of the three companions inside the hot tank. Abû Khairzarâh leaves the bodies by the municipal dump.

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1 "Men in the Sun", 1963.
and after departing for a moment, returns and removes their valuables. At the conclusion of the story, Abū Khaizarān wonders aloud why the men died without signalling their distress by rapping on the sides of the tank.

The commanding center for this story is the disastrous journey. Three separate escape journeys become one journey that ends in a passive death. Abū Qais, Asʿād and Marwān seek in vain for their own existence; they are unable to exist in the past because they have been uprooted by the Palestinian war, they have no present because they are non-entities without legal status; only the future holds any hope or promise, hence the urge to escape and begin anew. Abū Qais expresses these sentiments:

“Beyond this Shaṭṭ al-ʿArab (river), beyond it only, are found all the things of which he (Abū Qais) has been deprived”.

The tragic mistake made by the protagonists is their regarding escape to Kuwait as a means of salvation from their current wretched situation. They try to escape from their past lives and from themselves by embarking upon an almost metaphysical journey into an imagined paradise. Abū Khaizarān describes the situation:

“Can you imagine? These 150 kilometers seem to me to be the path that God promised that his people would travel before their distribution between Paradise and the Fire. Whoever falls from the path goes to the fire, and whoever traverses it goes to paradise; as for the Angels, they are the border guards.”

Escape as a means often is a theme in Palestinian literature. In “The Ship”, Jabra Ibrāhīm Jabrā clarifies the motive for the escape journey in ʿIsām al-Salmān’s address to the reader:

“The sea is the bridge of salvation”

Many characters in this novel look for escape by embarking on a sea voyage:

“Our true tragedy is that we are intellectual escapists”

one of them reprimandingly says.

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2 All quotations from Ghassān Kanafānī’s works are from The Complete Works of Ghassān Kanafānī (CW), Beirut, 1973, unless otherwise noted.
3 Ibid., CW I, p. 46.
4 Ibid., pp. 105-106.
5 Al-Safīna.
6 Ibid., p. 9.
7 Ibid., p. 134.