

# VOICE OF RESILIENCE: UNVEILING THE HUMANITARIAN TRAGEDY OF PALESTINIAN WOMEN IN THE LENS OF UMM SA'D

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**Abstract:** This article aims to discuss the humanitarian crisis that Palestinian women refugees have to face in the novel *Umm Sa'd* by Ghassan Kanafani. This humanitarian crisis is a result of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the 1948 Nakba incident, which continues to this day. This article reveals and analyzes the humanitarian crisis faced by Palestinian women in this novel using the state-ibuisism approach and qualitative descriptive methods. State-ibuisism is defined as the ideology of women's actions in taking care of their family, group, or state to support male power. Kanafani's main idea for Palestinian women to rebuild the Palestinian national narrative is a pro-natal movement using their wombs. Their wombs are positioned as a battlefield for the Israel and Palestine movements to determine the definition of their nation. This article contributes to providing an understanding of the role of Palestinian women in rebuilding the idea of a Palestinian national narrative, which makes the womb of Palestinian women a tool and a strategy for population dominance through statistical politics.

**Keywords:** Humanitarian Crisis; Refugees; Palestine; Umm Sa'd.

## Introduction

The year 2023 closed with many large-scale demonstrations from various corners of the world, protesting Israel's attack on Gaza, and Palestine. These demonstrations were followed by a boycott movement of Israeli products or the products of companies deemed affiliated with Israel. The invitation to join these two

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movements was spread via social media so that it was able to capture the attention of the world community and have a significant influence. Initially, these two movements were carried out in the name of religion. However, it later developed into a movement in the name of humanity. The goal is the same, namely for the Palestinian tragedy to end quickly.

Conflicts and wars between Israel and Palestine have occurred repeatedly for almost a century. This conflict began with the Nakba incident that occurred in 1948, which caused 725,000 Palestinians to lose their homes and country to live in refugee camps. Whether the refugee in Palestine or Israel, or the refugee who lived in neighboring countries, such as Jordan, Lebanon, or Syria. Of the 725,000, around 250,000 are refugees in the West Bank, 190,000 in Gaza, 30,000 are internal refugees within Israel, and 255,000 are refugees in neighboring countries around Palestine.<sup>1</sup> The Nakba incident in 1948 was not the only event that forced Palestinians to leave their country. Many events occurred later, such as the Naksah in 1967 which also forced the Palestinian population to leave Palestine, including the Israeli attack at the end of 2023. This series of Palestinian displacements changed the demographic shape of Palestine, as well as the area of Palestine which was increasingly narrowing. Abu Lughod calls this process of displacement de-Arabization and Judaization.<sup>2</sup>

Becoming a refugee and leaving the homeland has very serious implications for Palestinians. They become citizens without clear citizenship. Especially when the area of Palestine becomes smaller and smaller and disappears from the world map, they can no longer identify themselves as residents of Palestine, or residents of the country where they live. Palestine lost its authority as a state, and the host countries that provided them with assistance did not grant them citizenship. As a result, many of these Palestinian refugees later became stateless, or *al-bid'un* (*bid'un jinsīyah*). This lack of citizenship creates many problems for them, both political, social, and economic.

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<sup>1</sup> Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh, *Birthing the Nation (Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel)* (California: University of California Press, 2002), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Janet Abu-Lughod, "The Demographic Transformation of Palestine," in *The Transformation of Palestine: Essays on the Origin and Development of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, ed. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 163.

Andersen considers Palestinian refugees to be the largest number of refugees in the world. The refugees are spread across various regions of the world.<sup>3</sup> Their numbers continue to increase, which makes refugee camps increasingly crowded. Sa'dī divided the refugee areas for the Palestinian population into two, namely refugees within Palestine in the West Bank and Gaza; and refugees spread across several countries in the Middle East. These refugees live in shelter tents that are uninhabitable and do not meet health aspects, because they are crowded together and becoming increasingly cramped.<sup>4</sup>

Ghassan Kanafani (1939-1972) was the first person to voice the situation and conditions of the Palestinian population through novels<sup>5</sup>, and the novel *Umm Sa'd* was Kanafani's reaction to the Nakba incident in 1948 which brought him together with 255,000 Palestinian others to stranded in shelters in Lebanon. This novel published in 1969 or three years before his death, shows Kanafani's maturity in writing resistance literature.<sup>6</sup> More than that, Coffin<sup>7</sup> sees that this novel also explains Kanafani's gendered views on armed struggle that appear in his other novels. According to him, the struggle is a collective effort and not individual work. So even though all the armed revolutionary struggles that appear in his novels were carried out by men, the role of women in the revolution cannot be said to be marginal. This novel received a lot of attention from literary critics. Many studies use this novel as a study, both describing the image of the mother in this novel and

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<sup>3</sup> Lars Erslev Andersen, *The Neglected Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon and the Syrian Refugee Crisis* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), 2016), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Hibah Khalil Sa'dī, "al-Lajun al-Filastīniyyūn bayn al-Ightirāb wa al-Indimāj al-Siyāsī: Dirāsāt Ḥālat Mukhayyam Bilathih" (Ph.D Thesis--al-Najāḥ al-Waṭanīyah University, Nablus, 2010), 42, 49, and 95.

<sup>5</sup> Yahya Hassan Alwadhaf and Noritah Omar, "Narrating the Nation and Its Other: The Emergence of Palestine in the Postcolonial Arabic Novel," *3 L: Language, Linguistics, Literature (The Southeast Asian Journal)* 17, Special Issue (2011), 109.

<sup>6</sup> Shadi Neimneh, "Women in the Works of Ghassan Kanafani : A Comparative Reading of Two Novels," *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences* 49, no. 5 (2022), 493-94.

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Coffin, "Engendering Resistance in the Work of Ghassan Kanafani: All That's Left to You, Of Men and Guns, and Umm Sa'd," *The Arab Studies Journal* 4, no. 2 (1996), 101.

comparing realist and narrative depictions such as Yahi's research,<sup>8</sup> which describes Umm Sa'd as a realist mother as a narrative figure. Umm Sa'd is described as a Palestinian woman who is tough, strong, patient, persistent, and determined. Palestinian women are not only mothers to their biological children, but also mothers to all Palestinian children, both inside and outside Palestine. Rais' research<sup>9</sup> describes the four basic needs of Palestinian refugees in this novel, both physiological, namely the need for a homeland, food, drink, and peace of mind, the need for security, the need for love, and the need to be respected. Rahman's research<sup>10</sup> describes Umm Sa'd's character and analyzes it using Freud's literary psychology theory. Some studies compare this novel with other novels, such as the Neimneh study<sup>11</sup> which compares this novel with another Kanafani's novel, namely *Mā Tabqā Lakum*, or the al-Shāmī's study<sup>12</sup> which compares this novel with 17 novels by writers that discuss Palestinian women. Even though many studies have been carried out on this novel, studies on the novel *Umm Sa'd* are still considered important and relevant. From previous studies, as far as the author can find, the author has not found any other research that focuses its study on the humanitarian crisis faced by Palestinian women which is the formal object of this study. This study was conducted to answer three research questions: (1) What is the humanitarian crisis that Palestinian women face in their refugee camps? (2) What are Kanafani's ideas for Palestinian women to get out of the crisis? and (3) What is the actual idea? Does it strengthen Palestinian women or weaken them?

To answer these questions, this study uses a state ibuism approach. State Ibuism is an ideology that supports every action tak-

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<sup>8</sup> Zoulikha Yahi, "Surat al-Umm fī Riwayāt Umm Sa'd li Ghassan Kanafani Bayn al-Wāqī'iyah wa al-Takhyīl al-Sardi," *Majallah Ishkalāt fī al-Lughah wa al-Adab* 11, no. 4 (2022), 373-93.

<sup>9</sup> Yasir Rais, "al-Hājāt al-Insānīyah fī Riwayāt Umm Sa'd li Ghassan Kanafani (Dirāsah Sikulūjīyah Insānīyah)" (Undergraduate Thesis--UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Muhammad Syauci Fathur Rahman, "al-Bunyah al-Shakhṣīyah Umm Sa'd li Ghassan Kanafani (Dirāsah Tahlīlīyah Psikulūjīyah Adabīyah 'inda Sigmund Freud)" (Undergraduate Thesis--UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Neimneh, "Women in the Works of Ghassan Kanafani."

<sup>12</sup> Hassan Rashad al-Shāmī, *al-Mar'ah fī al-Riwayah al-Filastīniyah* (Damaskus: Itihād al-Kuttāb al-'Arab, 1998).

en by mothers to take care of a family, group, corporate class, or state without demanding power or prestige as a balance.<sup>13</sup> Suryakusuma<sup>14</sup> defines state Ibuism as the construction of women as mothers for the sake of national development to support male power. Mothers have a very broad role, both as mothers biologically and not. The concept of mother is not only limited to biological motherhood but also to her role as state ibuism. Women have become the object of state hegemony, which is closely related to the willingness of mothers to carry out this role.<sup>15</sup> This approach was deemed appropriate to use to analyze Kanafani's ideas about Palestinian women in this novel which is set ten days after the start of the 1967 war. Neimneh<sup>16</sup> considers this novel to be an anomaly in Kanafani's *muqāwamah* novels, most of which are androcentric. The novel *Umm Sa'd* features a female farmer as the main character, who Kanafani calls a real woman in her introduction, and not an imaginary character. According to Neimneh and Yahi, this novel shows Kanafani's view of women having an equally important role as men in efforts to resist Israeli rule. Women are the binary opposition to men who have roles that are different from the roles that men take but are complementary. Kanafani's attention provides a new perspective that enriches the narrative built through her novels because it gives women a stage. Women's resistance to Israeli rule in the private sphere must be seen as equal to men's resistance which is carried out openly by taking up arms, and not in a subordinate position under men.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Madelon Djajadiningrat-Nieuwenhuis, "Ibuisim and Priyayization: Path to Power?" in *Indonesian Women in Focus*, eds. E. B. Locher-Scholten and A. Niehof (Leiden: KITLV Press, n.d.), 44.

<sup>14</sup> Wenning Udasmoro and Elisabeth Prugl, "No Matter What—I've Got Rights: Women's Land Grab Protests in Banyuwangi, East Java," in *Gender in Peacebuilding: Local Practices in Indonesia and Nigeria*, eds. Elisabeth Prugl et al. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2021), 134.

<sup>15</sup> Mochammad Arief Wicaksono, "Mereka yang Tidak Dibayar Tinggi: Ibuisme, Taman Kanak-Kanak, dan Kampung di Indramayu," *Etnosia* 3, no. 2 (2018), 122.

<sup>16</sup> Shadi Neimneh, "The Motherland: An Archetypal and Postcolonial Reading of Ghassan Kanafani's *Umm Sa'd*," *Jordan Journal of Modern Language and Literatures* 13, no. 4 (2021), 687.

<sup>17</sup> Neimneh, "Women in the Works of Ghassan Kanafani," 494 and 496; Yahi, "Sūrat al-Umm fī Riwayāt Umm Sa'ad," 378 and 379.

## Humanitarian Crisis that Palestinian Women Have to Face in Their Camp

A joint report prepared by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in 2018 revealed Israel's actions in intimidating the Palestinian population by expelling and destroying their habitable homes. This intimidation and destruction occurred at night between 02.00 and 04.00 at night and was aggressive using electric shocks and tear gas, creating fear and trauma, especially for women and children. This intimidation and destruction not only have an impact on their psychological aspects, but is also compounded by impoverishment, and puts them in a position of losing their homes and being forced to become refugees.<sup>18</sup>

The decision to leave their homes and become refugees is not a choice for the Palestinian population but is the only thing they can take to maintain their lives, even though becoming a refugee is not easy as described by Kanafani in the novel *Umm Sa'd*.

Umm Sa'd is a female refugee, who lost her home during the Nakba incident in 1948. The war between Israel and Palestine turned 78% of the Palestinian population into refugees, and a country called Palestine disappeared from the world map.<sup>19</sup> Residents who previously had a house that was a source of dignity, wealth, self-respect, and an address where they could be found normally, became abnormally homeless, isolated, poor, and without a future. The Nakba changed the Palestinian people to be different, the absence of a private home at the individual level and a homeland at the collective level made the Palestinian population live a life without roots and citizenship. This lack of citizenship makes them unable to fulfill their basic needs, such as the need for security, the need for law, and the right to live in prosperity. Kanafani depicts the implications of this statelessness through the character Umm Sa'd who has to live a very hard life. In this novel, Umm Sa'd is depicted as a simple Palestinian mother with a white shawl covering her head, at the age of 40 who looks old and tired. However, this woman is also depicted as a strong woman who can

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<sup>18</sup> Alodaat (ed.), "Palestinian Women Under Prolonged Israeli Occupation (The Gendered Impact of Occupation Violence)," *Women's International League for Peace and Freedom* (2017), 8 and 11. [www.wilpf.org](http://www.wilpf.org)

<sup>19</sup> Ahmad H. Sa'di, "Catastrophe, Memory and Identity: Al-Nakba as a Component of Palestinian Identity," *Israel Studies* 7, no. 2 (2002), 175.

do hard work, whatever the form, to support her family. She has great determination and perseverance in living his life. This role is carried out because the mother is seen as a source of calm, purity, and enthusiasm.<sup>20</sup>

*Walākin nahā lā tashkū. Innahā sayyidat fī al-arbaʿīn, kamā yabdū lī, qawīyah kamā lā yastafīʿ al-ṣakhr, ṣabbūrah kamā lā yuṭīq al-ṣabr. Tuqaṭ-ṭīʿ ayyām al-usbūʿ jīʿatan wa dhibāban*<sup>21</sup>

However, she did not complain. She is a mother aged 40, I think. She is a very strong and very patient woman. She spends her weekly days coming and going from one workplace to another

Umm Saʿd had to work hard and play double roles, both as mother and father. Her husband was not present and carried out his role as head of the family. This absence is not always interpreted as death,<sup>22</sup> but rather the meaningful absence of Abū Saʿd who did not carry out his role as husband and father. Abū Saʿd sank into depression due to losing everything and chose to become a burden to Umm Saʿd. Umm Saʿd was forced to take several jobs at once to support her family's livelihood. She has no bargaining power, so she has to accept the small salary she gets from her employer. Her palms are described as hardened, dry, and cracked like firewood, even though they are strong and capable of making anything. Her cheeks showed years of suffering and fatigue. She had to work hard all day long, doing housework and cleaning her master's house. At night, she still has to take care of her children and family. Plus cleaning up the mud that had gotten into the tent she had lived in with his family for the last twenty years.

*Taḥarrakat kaḥḥā al-maṭwiyyatān fī khibḍihā, raʿyatubumā jamīlatayn qawīyyatayn qādiratayn dāʾiman ʿalā an taṣnaʿā shayʿan.*<sup>23</sup>

Her palms folded in her lap moved. Both look beautiful, strong and always able to do anything

<sup>20</sup> Yahi, "Sūrat al-Umm fī Riwayāt Umm Saʿd," 390.

<sup>21</sup> Ghassan Kanafani, *Umm Saʿd* (Cyprus: Dār Maṣṣūrāt al-Rimāl, 2013), 21.

<sup>22</sup> al-Shāmī, *al-Marʿah fī al-Riwayāt al-Filasṭīniyah*, 43.

<sup>23</sup> Kanafani, *Umm Saʿd*, 24.

*Kānat kaḥḥā māṭwiyyatayn ‘alā  
khiḍniḥā. Ra’yatubumā hunāk jāffatayn  
kaqī‘atay ḥaṭḥ, mushaqqaqatayn ka-  
jadḥiḥi haram, wa ‘abr al-akhādīd allatī  
ḥafarathā fihimā sunūn la tuḥṣā min al-  
‘amal al-ṣa‘b.*<sup>24</sup>

Her palms folded in her lap  
moved. Both looked dry, like two  
pieces of firewood. They were  
fractured like the walls of a py-  
ramid. Her cheeks looked sunken,  
showing the years filled with  
countless hard jobs

*Kāna nahārūḥā ṣaḥrā’ qāḥilab min al-  
ta‘b al-muḍnā. Mundhu abkar al-ṣubḥ  
wa ḥiya ta‘taṣir al-malābis wa al-  
mamāsiḥ, tunaẓẓif al-shabābik watajlū  
al-arḍ watanfaḍḍ al-sajjād (fī buyūt al-  
ākharin ṭab‘an, fa baytuhā fī al-mu-  
kḥayyam ghurfah mashṭūrāb min al-niṣf  
bi ḥā’it min al-tank).*<sup>25</sup>

The afternoon was a barren desert  
filled only with acute fatigue. Since  
early morning she had to wring out  
clothes and wipe or mop anything.  
Clean windows, sweep the ground,  
and vacuum carpets. (In someone  
else’s house, of course. Because  
her house is a tent with a room in  
the middle separated by walls made  
of zinc)

*Yaqrūṣ qadamayḥā al-ḥāfiyyatayn bi  
laḥm kaḥḥayḥā al-muḍarrajatayn bi  
aḥbar aḥdhiyyat al-ṣa‘idin wa al-ḥabiṭin  
kānat tafruk al-arḍ al-rakhāmiyah  
wasat layl al-nās al-nā’imin ‘amiqan fī  
diḥi ghurafihim al-mutarāmiyah warā’  
al-abwāb al-mughallaqah.*<sup>26</sup>

Her palms cleaned her bare feet  
from the shoe prints of people  
going up and down the stairs. She  
cleaned the marble floors in the  
middle of the night, when people  
were fast asleep in their warm  
rooms, behind the tightly closed  
doors of their flats

Her difficult situation meant that Umm Sa’d could not choose the job she wanted. According to Andersen,<sup>27</sup> The Lebanese government does not allow Palestinian refugees to take jobs in the public sector, jobs in the health sector, become lawyers or some other professions. This limited access to work causes widespread unemployment and an illegal job market. This includes the practice of social dumping.<sup>28</sup> Umm Sa’d can only access domestic work. This limitation also made her fall into social dumping, when she

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>27</sup> Andersen, *The Neglected Palestinian Refugees*, 20-23.

<sup>28</sup> Social dumping is a practice when an employer uses labor that is cheaper than the price set by the labor normally available.

worked as a cleaner in a large building in the middle of the city for five liras. Umm Sa'd became a worker who took the job of a Lebanese female worker, who charged seven lira, or two lira more than her.

*Inna al-rajul al-wāqif bi intizārihā in-namā yurid ḥamlahā 'alā al-'andah ilā al-'amal fī ihdā al-'imārāt al-kabirah wast al-madinah, ḥayth amdat limuddat shahr wa thalāthat ayyām tunazzif al-durja wa al-madkhal, wa ta'khubh fī kull marrah khams lirat.*<sup>29</sup>

The man standing was waiting for her. The man just wanted to take her back to work in one of the large buildings in the city center. She had worked cleaning the entrance and all the stairs of the building for one month plus three days. And for one visit she will get five liras

*"Ji't ilayk li aqul shay', ana allatī kuntū unazzif hādihā al-durj thalātha marrāt fī al-jum'ah. Wa qabl shahr wa thalāthat ayyām jā' al-khanwājā fa qāl li, 'Ma' al-salāmah.'"*

*"Kam yu'tinak?"*

*"Khams lirat, Yakhti."*

*"Kanū yu'tun nī sab' lirat. Ana imra'ah 'indī arba'at awlād. Wa qālū li sab' lirat kathīr."*<sup>30</sup>

"I came to tell you something. I am the person who cleans these stairs three times every Friday/Sunday. But one month plus three days ago, *Khanwājā* said, 'Goodbye to me.'"

"How much do they pay you?"

"Five liras, *Yakhti*."

"They gave me seven Lira. I am a mother with four children. They said seven liras were too much to pay to clean the building."

Sa'di in his notes, found that the majority of Palestinian refugees had lost the ability to interact with the environment in which they lived. Losing their home and homeland makes them lose their social status and become less confident. They feel they have lost their power and ability to produce something.<sup>31</sup> As experienced by Umm Sa'd's husband, he became depressed and only spent his time in coffee shops, not spent it in working. Her husband's attitude was compounded by his violence and his indifference towards Umm Sa'd who had to bear all the responsibilities and support her family financially by doing menial jobs for a small wage.

<sup>29</sup> Kanafani, *Umm Sa'd*, 58-59.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Sa'di, "al-Lajun al-Filastīniyyūn bayn al-Ightirāb wa al-Indimāj al-Siyāsī," 95.

*Ta'ish 'umrahā 'ashr marrāt fī al-ta'b wa al-'amal kay tantazī' luqmatuhā al-nazīfah wa luqam awladihā.*<sup>32</sup> All her life she lived with fatigue and labor, to get a clean meal for herself and her children

Kanafani describes Umm Sa'd as an ordinary woman who, although strong, also feels tired and hopeless. The difficult situation she had to face strengthened her desire to return to Palestine. However, this wish is not easy to realize, Palestine is no longer the nation-state it knew before the Nakba.

*"Ana mut'abah, yā ibn 'ammī. Ihtara'a 'umrī fī dhālik al-mukhayyam? Kull masā' aqūl ya Rabb, wa kull ṣabah aqūl ya Rabb. Wabā, qad marrat 'ish-rin sanah."* "I am tired, Yabna Ammi. I spent my life in that tent. Every afternoon, I pray, 'Ya Rab,' and in the morning I pray, 'Ya Rab.' And now it is only been twenty years."

*Lam takun mithl dumū' Umm Sa'd. Laqad jā'at mithl mā tatafajjar al-arḍ bi al-nabā' al-muntaẓar mundhu annal al-abad. Tafajjar al-bukā' min masām jildihā kulluh.*<sup>33</sup> She never showed her tears. The cry looked like a new spring that was emitting its water profusely, a spring that had been eagerly awaited from the start. Her tears did not just come out of her eyes, they also gushed out all over her skin.

The number of Palestinian refugees has continued to increase since 1948, making the holding camps increasingly densely populated. According to Sa'dī, this density has encouraged several donor agencies such as *The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East* (UNRWA) or the Red Cross to repair temporary cloth tents into semi-permanent structures.<sup>34</sup> UNRWA released an increase in the number of refugees in the 2020-2023 period. In 2020, there were 2.33 million Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA. In 2021 it will increase to 2.37 million people and in 2022 it will reach 2.42 million people. This number in 2023 changed to 2.91 million people in the second quarter, and shows an increase since the attack on October 8,

<sup>32</sup> Kanafani, *Umm Sa'd*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>34</sup> Sa'dī, "al-Lajjun al-Filasṭīniyyūn bayn al-Ighṭirāb wa al-Indimāj al-Siyāsī," 98-99.

2023, as more than one million Gaza residents decided to exit the region.<sup>35</sup> UNRWA is an organization founded to help Palestinian refugees fulfill their basic needs, such as education, health, clothing, food, and shelter. However, the services provided are very limited. Al-Qurtuby says that these refugees are still in extreme poverty and require an immediate response. Their socio-economic conditions are very worrying. They live in poverty. Even though they work, their salaries are very small. For their survival, they still have to rely on assistance from donor agencies such as UNRWA.

Sa'di found changes in the shape of the tents built by donor agencies. In 1948-1950, refugees only knew two types of tents, namely conical tents for one family and elongated tents that could be used by more than one family together. These tents were then repaired into semi-permanent buildings consisting of one room with a roof made of brick, in the 1950s. These semi-permanent buildings were given one room for families with under seven family members, and tents with two rooms for families with seven or more family members.<sup>36</sup> The Umm Sa'd tent building in this novel is semi-permanent, made of bricks with one room. Even though it looks better and more weather-resistant compared to the cloth tents they used in their first years in the refugee camp, the building is still not suitable for living in. The non-permanent roof will fly off when a storm hits, as well as the floor, which is still clay and will be flooded with mud every time it rains.

*Wa allatī 'asbat ba'd, fī mukhayyamāt  
al-tamazḡuq sanawāt lā qibal li aḥad bi  
ḥamlībā 'alā katīfayh.*<sup>37</sup>

She was a woman who lived in dilapidated tents for years, uninhabitable dwellings that no one could afford to live in

*Ana lā abkī yā Ibn 'Ammī. Awadd  
law astaṭī'. Laqad bakaynā kathīr...  
kathīr... kathīr... Anta ta'rīf, bakaynā  
akthar min mā ṭāfat al-miyāh fī al-*

I am not crying, Yabna Ammi. I want to cry if I can. We have shed a lot of tears. Very much and often. You know, our tears are more

<sup>35</sup> Erlina F. Santika, "Statistik Pengungsi Palestina Sejak 2020 Selalu Meningkatkan Tiap Tahun," October 18, 2023, available at <https://databoks.katadata.co.id/datapublish/2023/10/18/statistik-pengungsi-palestina-sejak-2020-selalu-meningkat-tiap-tahun>.

<sup>36</sup> Sa'di, "al-Lajjun al-Filasṭīniyyūn bayn al-Ighṭirāb wa al-Indimāj al-Siyāsī," 98-99.

<sup>37</sup> Kanafani, *Umm Sa'd*, 21.

*mukhayyam layl ams.*<sup>38</sup>

than the water that overflo-wed  
our tent last night

*Wa lākinnanī, yā Ibn ‘Ammī, širtu  
imra’ah ‘ajūz. Širtu at‘ab. Amḍaytu  
kull al-layl ghāriqah fī al-wahl wa al-  
mā’. ‘Isbrūn sanah.*<sup>39</sup>

But, Yabna Ammi, I am old now. I  
am getting tired. Every night, I had  
to drown in a pool of mud and  
water, for twenty years

*Fabaytubā fī al-mukhayyam gburfah  
mashṭurab min al-niṣf bi ḥā’iṭ min al-  
tank.*<sup>40</sup>

Her house is a one-room tent, with  
a wall made of zinc in the middle

*Ḥīn taduqq bāb al-bayt wataḍa’  
ashyā’ahā al-faqīrah fī al-madkhal, ta-  
fūḥ fī ra’sī rā’ihah al-mukhayyamāt bi  
ti’āsibā waṣumūdihā al-‘arīq wa bi bu-  
‘ūsibā wa āmalihā, tartadd ilā lisānī  
ghuṣṣat al-mirārah allatī ‘allakathā ḥat-  
tā al-dawwār sanah wara’a sanah.*<sup>41</sup>

When she knocked on the door of  
the house and put her worthless  
things at the door of the house, the  
smell of the tent with deep-rooted  
misery, resistance, and hope rush-  
ed into my head. The bitter taste  
and bitterness of the suffering she  
chewed year after year fell on my  
tongue

Bitterness, acute poverty, and economic incompetence affect the mental health of the refugees. Feelings of being abandoned and considered non-existent give rise to anger and hatred, as well as fear and doubt about interacting widely with the population of the country where they are. On the other hand, they have no political rights and no legal protection, either in Palestine or in the countries where they took refuge.<sup>42</sup> This was felt by Umm Sa’d who felt exhausted by the situation she had to face for twenty years in her refugee land. Fadhl’s mysterious death strengthened her desire to return to Palestine. Umm Sa’d felt very tired and afraid. She felt old and close to death.

*Fī al-layl aḥsastu bi annanī qaribah  
min al-nihāyah. Mā al-naf? Urīd an  
a’ish ḥattā arāhā. Lā urīd an amūt*

Last night, I felt that my end was  
near. But what else can I do? I  
want to live until I can see Pales-

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 21 and 22.

<sup>42</sup> Sa’dī, “al-Lajun al-Filaṣṭīniyyūn bayn al-Ightirāb wa al-Indimāj al-Siyāsī,” 96.

*hunā. Fī al-wahl wa wadkh al-maṭā-  
bikh.*<sup>43</sup>

tine. I do not want to die here,  
drowning in the moss and dirt of  
the kitchen

Andersen describes these refugees as forgotten citizens. Even though their presence is tolerated, they are not Lebanese citizens and are not part of Lebanon. Andersen classifies their humanitarian crises into, (1) economic crises, which create (2) social crises, such as poverty, unemployment, crime, illegal job markets, social dumping, and others. (3) Legal crisis, because they do not receive international legal protection. (3) Identity and citizenship crisis, due to the loss of their political, social, educational, and health rights.<sup>44</sup>

### **Women's Involvement in Building the Palestinian National Narrative**

Through this novel, Kanafani puts forward three main ideas, namely: (1) Re-establishing Palestinian sovereignty. This idea is carried out by reconstructing the Palestinian national narrative through words. According to him, intellectual resistance has a strong impact, although resistance using violence is still an important part and cannot be avoided.<sup>45</sup> This national narrative is counter to the myth built by Israel that Palestine was an empty, uninhabited land before the founding of Israel in 1948.<sup>46</sup> This national narrative is closely related to the land which is at the center of the conflict between Palestine and Israel, both materially and as an idea. This land also includes inhabited space and culture that is closely related to the environment where the land is located.<sup>47</sup> (2) The refugees returned to Palestine. Palestine was constructed and reconfigured, becoming not only a physical country but also a nation and state that lives in the imagination, which crosses space and time. This construction is carried out through symbols used to

<sup>43</sup> Kanafani, *Umm Sa'd*, 29.

<sup>44</sup> Andersen, *The Neglected Palestinian Refugees*, 20-23.

<sup>45</sup> Heba A. S. Wadi, "Features of Resistance Literature in the Palestinian Literature: Ghassan Kanafani's Works as Example," *Lakon* 9, no. 2 (2020), 59.

<sup>46</sup> Alwadhaf and Omar, "Narrating the Nation and Its Other," 109.

<sup>47</sup> Nasser Abu Farhah, "Land of Symbols: Cactus, Poppies, Orange, and Olive Trees in Palestine," *Journal of Identities* 15, no. 3 (n.d.), 343-45.

unite Palestinian identity. (3) Resistance is a collective struggle involving all elements of society. Women were seen as capable of resistance through statistical politics and providing their children as *fidā'i*. Her womb becomes a tool and strategy for population domination through statistical politics.

When Sa'd joined the Palestinian *fidā'i* forces, Umm Sa'd supported his decision. Resistance is the only alternative they can rely on to return to Palestine.<sup>48</sup> Umm Sa'd felt she had to do whatever she could, even if it was sending her children to become *fidā'i*.

*Laqad dhabab Sa'd wa lākinnaḥum  
amsakūh. Wa mundhu yawmayn, kuntu  
a'taqid annah yuḥarib. Hādḥā al-ṣabāḥ  
'arāftu annah kāna maḥbūsan. Yā li al-  
'ār.*

Sa'd has already left. However, Israeli troops captured him. Two days ago he went to war and this morning I heard he was captured. *Yā li al-'ār...*

*Ṣabāḥ al-ithnayn, sami'nā al-rādīyū fa  
ḥamala aghrādah wa jama' rifāqah wa  
ṭala'ū min al-mukḥayyam ka al-'afārīt.  
Aqūl lak, annanī laḥiqtu bih. Akḥadht  
ṭarīq mukhtaṣar, wa qābaltuh. Fa rubb  
madkhal al-mukḥayyam wa asma'tuh  
kayf uzaghriṭ. Wa qad ṣall yadhak  
ḥattā ikhtaṣā 'an anṣārī. Wa lākin yā  
khasrah, lam yaṣil ḥabasūh.<sup>49</sup>*

A last Monday morning, we listened to the radio together. After hearing the news, he immediately packed his things and gathered his friends, then they left rushing like ifrit genies. I told you, I met him. I took a shortcut to meet him. Around the entrance to the camp, I heard *Zaghariṭ*<sup>50</sup> to him. He laughed and still laughed until disappeared from my sight. But unfortunately, before he arrived, he was detained

Sa'd's joining as *fidā'i* raised Umm Sa'd's hopes of returning to Palestine. Exile creates the idea of a place that does not exist (Palestine), whether the idea in the imagination, the choice of words, or the desire for independence.<sup>51</sup> This idea became Umm Sa'd's strength to survive. She hopes that she will not only have two chil-

<sup>48</sup> Elias Khoury, "Remembering Ghassan Kanafani, or How a Nation was Born of Story Telling," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 42, no. 3 (2013), 87.

<sup>49</sup> Kanafani, *Umm Sa'd*, 13.

<sup>50</sup> *Zaghariṭ* is a loud, shrill ululation or ulululu sound that is emitted to show feelings of joy and happiness.

<sup>51</sup> Khoury, "Remembering Ghassan Kanafani," 86.

dren who will be able to open the way to return to Palestine. She hoped to have at least ten children become *fidā'ī* or hoped to be able to do something for Sa'd and his friends. Umm Sa'd is not an individual, but a combination of the body, soul, mind, concerns, and hard work of Palestinian refugees. Umm Sa'd was the voice of Palestine who paid the price for Palestine's defeat in the Nakba War in 1948.<sup>52</sup>

A strong patriarchal culture does not give women the opportunity to be directly involved in war by holding weapons. So, this novel offers the idea of women's important contribution in returning to their homeland, which men cannot provide, namely by giving birth to as many sons as possible. Giving birth to a warrior or becoming *batīn 'askarī* is a woman's active participation in reconstructing her nation through reproduction. Reproduction is reconstructed not only about children born to women but also about the nation and state. Giving birth to a child is giving birth to a nation. There is a national narrative in Palestinian women's decision to give birth to as many children as possible. This idea adds to the battlefield between Israel and Palestine, which is not only a battle using weapons in the true sense, but also a battle in the womb of women, as a strategy for population domination through statistical politics. The recommendation that Palestinian women give birth to as many children as possible is the antithesis of the Israeli government's stance which supports and encourages Israeli women to have as many children as possible.<sup>53</sup> Women become tools and media to strengthen men's power.

In Palestinian myth, women are symbolized as earth. Kanafani's identification of Umm Sa'd as a symbol of land looks organic and complete. For example, Umm Sa'd's forehead was the color of dust, when she cried her tears gushed out like spring water that first came out of the ground, and her body odor smelled like the smell of a damp village.<sup>54</sup> This myth emerged because of the similarities of both, women and land who give more without hope of getting anything. As Abū Sa'd stated when he bragged about his wife to other men, "*hādhib al-mar'ah talid al-awlād fa yaṣīrū fidā'iyyīn; hiya takhlif wa filastīn ta'kebudi*" (this woman has given birth to my

<sup>52</sup> Coffin, "Engendering Resistance in the Work of Ghassan Kanafani," 112.

<sup>53</sup> Kanaaneh, *Birthing the Nation*.

<sup>54</sup> Coffin, "Engendering Resistance in the Work of Ghassan Kanafani," 112.

children, and they all joined the Palestinian *fidā'i* forces; this woman gives and Palestinians take what she gives).<sup>55</sup>

Women's wombs become a field of resistance between Israel and Palestine. A contestation that determines the definition of nation and community. Israeli political arithmetic developed several laws, namely: (1) the law of return, namely that the owner of Israeli citizenship is determined based on race and descent, not the place where he was born. Any citizen of Jewish descent has the right to Israeli citizenship. In contrast, non-Jewish Arabs born in territory that is now part of the state of Israel have no right to Israeli citizenship. Land in this area is only intended for the Jewish race and its descendants. (2) The second law that they apply in political arithmetic is the recording of names based on nation and religion. The results of these records show a very significant difference in the number of Arab and Jewish populations. This data is the basis for Israeli politics and policies to increase the birth rate for Jewish women of reproductive age. Various efforts have been made, starting from giving pronatalist awards as hero mothers to women who give birth to their tenth child, providing prenatal allowances or incentives, banning contraception, and abortion, and introducing the reproductive system in schools.<sup>56</sup> However, these various policies did not show meaningful results. The population of Israel is still lower than the population of Palestine, both Palestinian Arabs who still live in the territory that is part of Israel and *legal* refugees who are scattered in various countries where they have lived. The fertility rate of Palestinian mothers is higher than that of Israeli mothers. Palestinian women's fertility rate is one of the highest in the world, with an average of 4.38 births per woman.<sup>57</sup> These statistical figures are a hope and a guarantee for the survival of a nation. So Kanaaneh sees that high fertility and birth rates are a form of demographic resistance because these statistical figures are the basic premise of modern democratic politics globally, which associates nationalism with reproduction and women.<sup>58</sup> Women are not only tools and media for male hegemony but are placed as the one who

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<sup>55</sup> Kanafani, *Umm Sa'd*, 73.

<sup>56</sup> Kanaaneh, *Birthing the Nation*, 33-35.

<sup>57</sup> Hasan Arafat et al., "Determinants of Pregnancy Outcomes After Assisted Reproductive Therapy: A Sample from the West Bank, Palestine," *Cureus* 15, no. 8 (2023), 2.

<sup>58</sup> Kanaaneh, *Birthing The Nation*, 59 and 63.

has the responsibility to produce these numbers. Their body became a marker of national boundaries and an arena of fierce competition.

Kanafani put forward this idea through a change in Abū Sa'd's attitude, from having lost his enthusiasm for life and being severely depressed, to becoming enthusiastic and cheerful. He gained awareness of the meaning of life with Sa'd's death. The death of a martyred *fidā'i* can be interpreted as a confirmation of life itself. Because death as a *shahīd* is interpreted by Islam as life that is eternal and transcends time. Death marks a new beginning. The struggle carried out by individual *fidā'i*, turns into a collective struggle of the people of a nation.<sup>59</sup> This awareness is also shown in the transformation of Abū Sa'd's attitude towards his wife. Abū Sa'd's indifferent and rude attitude turned gentle and caring with his wife's fatigue. He realized that his wife was an important woman, who had given birth to his children, to be handed over to Palestine which needed its best sons.

*Ḥin yata'attal 'an al-'amal kān yaẓdād faẓāḡab. Šār ḥadithub li Umm Sa'd akthar luyūnah.*<sup>60</sup>

When he lost his job, he became increasingly violent. However, his words turned softer when talking to Umm Sa'd.

*Wa 'indahā waḍa' Abū Sa'd kaḡḡah 'alā katif ẓamjatib wa akhadha yaḡḡah bi wudd ḡayr mutawaḡḡa'. Wa ta-daffaqat al-dumū' fi 'aynay Umm Sa'd.*<sup>61</sup>

He placed his palms onto his wife's shoulders and unexpectedly, he began to massage her lovingly. Umm Sa'd, who did not expect her husband's gentle attitude, started crying tears of joy.

*Wa shadd Abū Sa'd naḡmah wa ashār labā qā'il li al-rajul al-'ajūḡ alladhī kāna mā yaẓāl yaḡzur ila al-sāḡab, 'ḡadhib al-mar'ab talid al-awlād fa yaḡsirū fidā'iyyīn. Hiya takḡlif wa Filasṡīn ta'ḡbudh.'*<sup>62</sup>

Abū Sa'd approached the old man who was still busy looking at the yard. His hand pointed at his wife and said, "This woman has given birth to my children, and they all joined the Palestinian *fidā'i* forces. This woman gives and Palestinians

<sup>59</sup> Khoury, "Remembering Ghassan Kanafani," 88.

<sup>60</sup> Kanafani, *Umm Sa'd*, 69.

<sup>61</sup> Kanafani, 71.

<sup>62</sup> Kanafani, 73.

take what she gives.”

The transformation of Abū Sa’d’s attitude is Kanafani’s offer to the struggle of Palestinian women. The struggle of these women is an important hope for their great dream of restoring Palestinian sovereignty. This transformation is strengthened by the symbol of the vine that Umm Sa’d planted in Kanafani’s house. Abu Farhah found that there were many symbols of Palestine in *muqāwamah* novels that appeared throughout the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>63</sup> These symbols are closely related to the earth such as Cactus, Poppy Flowers, Oranges, or Olives. These symbols will be followed by new symbols that continue to appear, such as the watermelon slice symbol which is associated with the Palestinian flag in 2023. The vine branch, which in the first chapter is depicted as dry and withered, then transforms in the final chapter to show life. This change is hope and encouragement for them. Change is a marker of the success of resistance.<sup>64</sup> Transformation is a collective effort and requires active support from all elements of society. This resistance does not only involve taking up arms but also requires the reconstruction of Palestinian identity, namely a new Palestinian identity as a nation-state after the Nakba.<sup>65</sup>

## Female Reproduction in Islam

In a patriarchal society system, women are seen as individuals who are dependent on men, so they are almost completely dominated by men, including those that affect their reproductive rights and health. According to Mintarsih and Pitrotussaadah, this problem is motivated by gender inequality, which means that women do not have many opportunities to determine their reproductive rights.<sup>66</sup> From the Islamic perspective, reproduction is an autonomous right and is fully owned by every individual.<sup>67</sup> Women’s re-

<sup>63</sup> Farhah, “Land of Symbols”; Fitri Liza and Zainal Abidin, “Hegemoni Politik Melalui Adab Al-Muqawamah pada Konteks Palestina dan Israel: Studi Antropologi Sastra dan Komunikasi,” *Rijabuna* 1, no. 1 (2021), 54.

<sup>64</sup> Neimneh, “Women in the Works of Ghassan Kanafani,” 684.

<sup>65</sup> Khoury, “Remembering Ghassan Kanafani,” 86.

<sup>66</sup> Mimin Mintarsih and Pitrotussaadah, “Hak-Hak Reproduksi Perempuan dalam Islam,” *Journal Studi Gender dan Anak* 9, no. 1 (2022), 98-99.

<sup>67</sup> Siti Masykuroh and Effendi, “Islamic Perspective About Women’s Reproductive Health Rights,” *Al Humiyah* 2, no. 2 (2022), 89.

productive rights must be guaranteed. Each individual has the freedom to determine his reproductive potential. Radical-libertarian feminists also agree with this opinion. They claim that being a mother is a job that drains women's energy, both physically and psychologically. So according to them, women should be the ones who decide on their reproductive activities, according to their wishes.<sup>68</sup>

However, Serour sees that reproductive rights cannot be said to be entirely personal, because this choice involves many aspects, such as the partner, the child to be born, the family, society, and the world in general. This is what makes a person's reproductive choices in Islam influenced by various contexts, norms, cultures, and religions.<sup>69</sup> As Aggarwal believes, Palestinian reproduction is a form of resistance. The reaction to Israeli reproduction which has the full support of the Israeli government, on the other hand, is also a reaction to the bad pregnancy experiences of Palestinian women in the Gaza and West Bank areas. Many Palestinian women in Gaza and the West Bank experience psychological trauma due to being forced to abort or give birth in very bad situations. The Palestinian community is carrying out this pro-Christmas movement to guarantee the survival of the Palestinian people and ensure that Israel cannot form a majority state. Palestinian women are the mothers of the nation, with high fertility rates. They have the task of giving birth to children, especially males in large numbers. Their failure to make this movement successful made them considered anti-nationalist.<sup>70</sup>

Even though this idea seems to show the positive contribution of women in the Palestinian struggle this idea places women as second-class citizens. Women become objects that do not exist in themselves and must be closely related to the national narrative, namely by giving birth to as many children as possible, without the right to determine when to have children and in what numbers. In

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<sup>68</sup> Rosemarie Tong and Tina Fernandes Botts, *Feminist Thought*, Fifth Edition (New York: Routledge, 2018), 3.

<sup>69</sup> Gamal Serour, "Islamic Perspective in Human Reproduction," *Ethics, Bioscience and Life* 3, no. 3 (2008), 35.

<sup>70</sup> Sanchita Aggarwal, "Reproductive Justice in Occupied Palestine: Biopolitical Policies and Experience," *E-International Relation* (2022), 4. Retrieved from <https://www.e-ir.info/2022/11/06/reproductive-justice-in-occupied-palestine-biopolitical-policies-and-experience/>.

Islam, female fertility is a positive thing which is one of the recommended criteria in choosing a partner. However, Islam gives women the opportunity to control their bodies, one of which is by allowing contraception within certain limits. This is in line with the World Health Organization statement in 2007 which states that each couple has freedom and responsibility regarding the number, distance, and time of birth of their children. According to the author, the idea of the resistance role of Palestinian women by giving birth to as many children as possible is more influenced by religious and cultural practices, as the results of Speake's research found that countries with a majority Muslim population in the Middle East and North Africa do not give women the opportunity to determine their reproductive rights. Women's bodies are considered the property of society and the state. Control of women is a way to overcome various political, economic, and cultural problems.<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

76 years after the Nakba incident in 1948, Palestinian refugees still have to live in camps and have to face various humanitarian crises. The humanitarian crisis that Palestinian refugees have to face, as stated by Kanafani in the novel *Umm Sa'd*, is in the form of acute poverty, lack of adequate housing, food shortages, limited access to health services, educational services, violence, and being victims of social dumping. All these crises are caused by their statelessness or *al-bid'un*, which can only be overcome by returning their citizenship.

Kanafani's offer to Palestinian women in the novel *Umm Sa'd* to fight back through statistical politics by making their wombs a new battlefield in State Ibuisism theory will only support male hegemony and make them objects and second-class society. From an Islamic perspective, women have rights and control over their bodies and reproductive systems. Although many aspects will influence her in deciding whether she will get pregnant or not. This pro-natal movement for refugee women will only multiply their

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<sup>71</sup> Beth Speake, "Islam and Women's Reproductive and Sexual Rights in the MENA Region," *E-International Relation* (2012), 1 and 6. Retrieved from <https://www.e-ir.info/2012/09/11/islam-and-womens-reproductive-and-sexual-rights-in-the-mena-region/>.

suffering. So, it is necessary to find other ideas for the involvement of Palestinian female refugees in their resistance efforts to restore Palestinian sovereignty. Ideas that maintain the honor and dignity of women.

Furthermore, the resilience and agency of Palestinian women should be reimagined through empowering frameworks that emphasize education, economic independence, and political participation. These pathways can enable them to contribute meaningfully to the Palestinian cause while preserving their dignity and autonomy. Collaborative efforts from international organizations, local leadership, and the global community must prioritize sustainable solutions that uplift Palestinian women as equal partners in the struggle for justice and sovereignty, rather than relegating them to roles that perpetuate their subjugation.

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