

Imprisoned Souls in Ghassan Kanafani's Men in the Sun and Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea

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The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2018
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the theme of imprisonment, both physical and spiritual, in two novels, *Men in the Sun* (1963) by the Palestinian Ghassan Kanafani and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by the Dominican Jean Rhys. The paper will explore how both writers depict the suffering of their characters, who are stuck in an unwelcoming environment and uprooted from their own land and homes, ending up in both physical and spiritual imprisonment. Regardless of totally different geography and culture, the paper attempts at showing the universality of the predicament of alienation and the unsurmountable hurdles individuals like the protagonists in both novels experience in their relentless pursuit of their basic human rights: identity, recognition, and an opportunity in a world where they are crushed by social, economic, cultural, and political powers. By tracing the inner and outer conflicts of these characters, the paper will demonstrate that the personal and the political are inextricably linked regardless of ethnicity, religion, or nationality.

Keywords: imprisonment, anguish, identity, alienation

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Introduction

In Richard Lovelace's (1642) poem "To Althea, from Prison," the speaker's soul could rise above imprisonment and find solace and freedom in love, thus concluding: "Stone walls do not a prison make/ Nor iron bars a cage." Similarly, the narrator in Lord Byron's (1816) remarkable work "Prisoner of Chillon" could feel free in spirit the moment he hears a bird's chirping outside his cell. His strong will and optimism make him befriend not only the other inmates like mice and spiders but even his chains. However, in real life as depicted in more realistic literary works, conditions are in many cases too horrendous for man to cope with. One might be physically or spiritually imprisoned by oppressive powers, be they natural, political, social, or economic. Tragic death or sheer madness could be the inevitable consequence of such ordeals as is the case of Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* (1963/1983) and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966/1983).

Body

Not unlike many literary works that depict the wrenching predicament of the crestfallen and the bereaved throughout human history, both works meticulously portray how the political and the personal get inextricably linked, with their protagonists ruthlessly uprooted and dispossessed during a certain historical moment to end up totally alienated and entrapped in an irrevocable past, a disorienting and agonizing present, and a blurry and treacherous future. This paper attempts at exploring the plight the characters in both novels find themselves pushed into as a result of beyond-their-will forces, which trigger them to clutch to false rays of hope in their pursuit of a decent and safe life. Unfortunately, all their efforts turn out to be futile where both Kanafani and Rhys see that people confronting such alienation are mercilessly crushed by historical and political powers.

Abu Qais, Asaad, and Marwan in *Men in the Sun* accidentally meet in Basra, Iraq while trying to find their way to Kuwait, the oil-rich country and the dreamland for many in the 1960s. Not only do the three protagonists aspire for a better life but also they share a tormenting past of war and displacement and a harsh present of destitution and despair. While in Basra, their reveries unravel more details about their woes. Although they belong to three different generations, they all were the victims of the Israeli occupation of their land in 1948 in the wake of the withdrawal of the British troops, which resulted in their people's exodus to bordering countries.

Abu Qais is literally imprisoned in the past. His nostalgia to his land, to his olive trees, with which he is in a love equal to nothing but perhaps to his deep worries about his wife and son, and his sadness for his baby daughter, who was too weak to survive such tough conditions. He is overwhelmed by these trees to the extent that he can neither believe nor accept the reality that the past has gone forever, thus his wait for ten years literally doing nothing except dreaming of his "lost paradise." He reprimands himself for "squatting like an old dog in a miserable hut" that long to be convinced that "you have lost your trees, your house, your youth, and your whole village. (Kanafani, p. 13).

In another reminiscence and in reference to the meagre support offered to the refugees by the United Nations, Abu Qais laments this dire condition, "Will you spend the

whole of your life eating the flour ration for one kilo of which you sacrifice all your honour at the doors of officials” (p. 47)? With this unbearable feeling of loss, helplessness, and estrangement, it is no wonder that he envies Ustaz Salim, the teacher of the village, who was lucky enough to get killed before this tribulation. Salim had the courage to tell the traditionally religious villagers that he did not know how to pray, but he definitely knew how to use a gun to defend himself and his people. He addresses the dead man, “Would you have been willing to carry all your years on your shoulders and flee across the desert to Kuwait to find a crust of bread” (p. 11)?

Even when dreaming of carving out a living in Kuwait, Abu Qais cannot but be haunted by his past, his olive trees, so the money he will save there, he ponders, might be enough “to send Qais to school and buy one or two olive shoots” (p. 46). Succumbing to life’s necessities, he reluctantly decides to take the plunge and follow other Palestinians who have previously headed to Kuwait. Failing to persuade the Iraqi smuggler, whom we come to know as the fat man, to accept ten dinars out of the fifteen he all has got, Abu Qais leaves the smuggler’s office feeling “his whole head had filled with tears, welling up from inside” (p. 15), and resorts to the only refuge he knows: the earth. Only there can he be himself, but even there, with his chest on the ground, ruminating about his land is inescapable. He feels the earth throbbing under him, and thinking that the dampness is because of yesterday’s rain, he realizes with a start that he is in the desert in August, thousands of miles far from his own land, and that “The sky now could rain nothing but scorching heat and dust” (p. 9). Commenting on this scene, Ben White (2005) confirms that “the land is significant because of its integral role in Palestinian society, a parochialism expressed in a Mourid Barghouti poem,: ‘the address of a house, a roof, a guest, a neighbor to be visited,/a stroll in streets which my footsteps long for,/a friend's knock at the door, not the night police.’ [...] The Palestinians lend their understanding of the land a more domesticated and quotidian tone, where the economic life of the community is intertwined with a husbandry of the land” (p. 2). Nadeen Shaker (2015) sees that “Within Kanafani’s novella, geography and memory become elemental to the experience of trauma and struggle” (P. 2)

Assad, like his future trip companion, had to leave his village in Palestine and take a refuge in Jordan. Having been a political activist, he participated in demonstrations that condemned the occupation in the hope of embarrassing the Arab regimes and the international community to support their return to their land. Instead, he was chased, imprisoned, and tortured by the Jordanian police; he recalls the aching moment of humiliation when an officer once spits in his face, feeling “the saliva ran slowly down his forehead and gathered on the tip of his nose in a nasty viscous mess” (Kanafani, p. 47). To his good luck, the policeman whom he was handed to sympathized with his cause and let him go while grumbling, “Damn this uniform” (p. 47). Like Assad, who is stuck as a refugee with no legal papers in country which is not his, this policeman is imprisoned in his uniform and his job, unable to speak his mind, to speak truth to power in such a despotic regime. Another manacle chains Assad down is his father’s vow to his uncle that he will marry his cousin Nada, according to traditions. Although Assad does not intend to, his severe need for money to run away and find his way to Kuwait makes him swallow his pride and accept fifty dinars from his uncle, but he plans to send the money back as soon as he gets his first payment. In the fat man’s office, Assad is more cautious than Abu Qais as a result of having been betrayed by a

Palestinian smuggler and left in the middle of nowhere between Jordan and Iraq, where a western tourist gives him a lift to Baghdad.

Similar to Abu Qais and Assad, Marwan, the 16-year-old Palestinian, leaves the refugee camp, heads to Iraq, and reaches the fat man's office. Fearing of being exploited because of his young age, Marwan tries to show manhood and threatens to report the fat man to the police if he does not accept five dinars for the trip. The result is a curse and a heavy hand crushing down to his cheek. Totally shocked, he realizes "that any attempt to restore his honour was futile" (p. 23), thus digesting humiliation and leaving the office with a burning cheek.

The despair that pushes Marwan to embark on such a trip differs from Abu Qais's and Assad's only in a few details. He falls short of his expectations to become a physician when both his father and brother turn their backs to the family, thus feeling the obligation to leave school to care for his mother and siblings. His father is too tired of living in a refugee camp under a tin roof and finds the opportunity to make his humble dream come true by getting married to Shafiq, the one-legged woman, who, has a house with a concrete roof. His brother, Zakaria, already working in Kuwait, has not only stopped sending money to the family after he gets married but also urged Marwan to quit his foolish dreams of education and find himself a job, or to use his terms, "plunge into the frying pan with everyone else" (p. 28). Marwan *is* in the frying pan now. He literally is. What is the 'frying pan' if not this scorching heat of the desert and the agonizing desolation he is undergoing now? Definitely, what Abu Qais feels about this dire condition that "More than at any time in the past he felt alien and insignificant" (p. 13) definitely applies to Marwan and Assad as well.

In Basra, the three men come to meet another Palestinian, Abul Khayzuran, who drives a water tank that belongs to the wealthy Kuwaiti Haj Rida, and has been preying individuals like them to make some extra money by smuggling them to Kuwait. Although they are deeply worried and hesitant about his plan – crossing the borders inside the closed metal tank in the inferno of August – Abul Khayzuran takes advantage of their desperate need to save a little money and convinces them to be his passengers. He assures them that the mission will be easy because of his strong relations with the Iraqi and the Kuwaiti frontier guards and that the tank itself is as much well-known and untouchable as its owner.

Though seemingly happy and in control, Abul Khayzuran turns out to be as miserable as his customers. His torment is perhaps worse than theirs. While fighting during the 1948 war in Palestine, he was seriously injured and had to be castrated by doctors to survive. His emasculation has left him unforgettable scars in both body and soul to the extent that whenever he asked why not married, he keeps silent, feels the "pain plunging between his thighs" (p. 38), and recalls how unendurable that moment was when he realized that he had forever lost what he calls his manhood. For ten years, he "had lived that humiliation day after day and hour after hour" (p. 38).

Abul Khayzuran's "frying pan" is not less blazing than Marwan's or Assad's or Abu Qais's. His attempt to find consolation in making more and more money is in vain. He is imprisoned in this everlastingly excruciating memory that would not set him free, in this desert-like body and the desert he has to cross every now and then in this lifeless metal tank. Neither money nor the water filling his tank nor even all the

waters on earth would quench his thirst for a woman and a family. What makes matters more painful for him is that he got involved in the fight to defend his homeland, but he ended up losing both, his manhood and his country. Even his tank, which is supposed to be a symbol of life providing water to people in this sweltering wasteland, turns out to a tomb for the three men who suffocate inside to death as it took him more than the expected six or seven minutes to get them out. The sad irony is that he is delayed by the Kuwaiti frontier guards who insist that he tell them about his relationship with Kawkab, an Iraqi belly-dancer.

It seems that such loss, imprisonment, and alienation the three men have been undergoing are escapable only in one way: death. According to Siddiq (1984), the novel “dramatizes the futility of the effort by the uprooted Palestinian refugees to look for a new home, a new future, and ultimately, a new identity” (p.10). Symbolizing the impotent Palestinian and Arab leadership at that time to support the Palestinians to return to their land and achieve national independence, Abul Khayzuran, the emasculated and irreparably defeated, is definitely not a proper choice to lead the three men. Magrath (1979) sees that they “never see the sun that kills them. They remain literally in darkness while trusting in an inept leadership” (p. 100). Similarly, Audebert (1984) believes that Abul Khayzuran fails to seize the opportunity and make a final “heroic effort to save their lives” (p. 79). Worse, his “personal despair and moral weakness have corrupted him” (Harlow, 1985, p. 104) to the extent that instead of burying the corpses, he throws them on a garbage dump and takes their meagre possessions. Obviously, his sordid condition has radically turned him from an enthusiastic freedom fighter to a frivolous burglar, just like his name, “a weak hollow structure that is impressive on the outside but lacking a central strong core” (Magrath, p. 100). The maximum he could do to spare himself the pangs of remorse is blaming the victims for their death, wondering at the very end of the novel, “Why didn’t you bang the sides of the tank? Why? Why? Why?” (Kanafani 56)?

Though living on the other side of the world, Antoinette of Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* is subjected to similar atrocities, being incessantly victimized by external powerful forces beyond her ability to combat, uprooted from her home, and pushed not only to another country but even to another continent, where she is ruthlessly imprisoned until she eventually decides in the heat of “mad” passion to make her recurrent dream come true and set her soul free by the only option she has got, burning down both prisons, the castle and her body. We then discover that Antoinette is nobody but Bertha, the mad woman in the attic in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847/2012). Jean Rhys, the Dominican writer, has taken the effort to imagine and narrate how Bertha, the Jamaican, comes to live in England as Rochester’s mad wife.

Being the daughter of an English ex-slave owner in Jamaica, Antoinette Cosway’s plight starts while still a child after abolishing slavery in the West Indies in 1833 and her father’s death. Antoinette, together with her mother and younger bedridden brother, has to live in endless fear. Their estate is no more the symbol of safety it used to be as they are loathed by the newly free blacks and unaccepted by the English, who “began to refine the qualifications of Englishness, making them more exclusive and promulgating the idea that the colonists were never truly ‘English’” (Kadhim, 2011). She herself as a child is confusingly torn apart between both cultures. Her mother scolds her for behaving like a black and playing with black Tia, while the blacks consider her a “white cockroach”. Nor is the family welcome by the ‘pure English’

because the mother is a Creole. In this hostile environment, their garden, which used to be as “large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible” (Rhys, p. 19) has gone wild now, their horse is poisoned, and they are terrified day and night, becoming literally prisoners in their own house. Shortly after a rich Englishman, Mr. Mason, marries her mother, their house is set on fire, resulting in her brother’s death, the mother’s total collapse and Antoinette’s falling unconscious because of a head injury by a stone surprisingly thrown at her by Tia. She wakes up two weeks later at Aunt Cora’s house to find out that they have become refugees and that her mother has gone mad. Her attempt to visit her mother before her death was disastrous as she rejected her, and what horrified her more is seeing her mother abused by the black man and woman hired by Mr. Mason to care for her.

Antoinette is then sent to a convent as a Mason, not a Cosway, where she remains until becoming a pretty, but sad, lonely, and vulnerable young woman. According to Valerie Roper (1988), “Antoinette was young but she was left without a place, minus part of her cultural identity and fast losing her personal creole identity” (p. 27). She has been taught in her sanctuary about heaven and God’s mercy, about justice, and “transcendent beauty” – the very thing she fails to feel outside the convent, as people keep gossiping that she is not less mad than her mother. This makes her yearn for death, saying “I could hardly wait for all this ecstasy and once I prayed for a long time to be dead” (Rhys, p. 57). Like Abu Qais, she always dreams of her old house, which was once a symbol of security, before turning into that of terror and stigmatization.

In eighteen months in the convent, she is visited only once by her stepfather, and in his second visit, she knows he has prepared her a marriage to an Englishman, whose name remains anonymous until we come to know later that he is no one but Bronte’s Rochester. Denied inheritance by his family, he is trying his luck in the West Indies, where many Englishmen come either to marry a rich woman or to buy cheap estates. The match is arranged hastily, and the couple moves with a few servants to one of the Windward Islands for their honeymoon at a small estate that belonged to Antoinette’s mother. At another point in the novel, we know that Richard Mason, Antoinette’s step brother has paid Rochester thirty thousand pounds for this marriage, and according to the English law at that time, everything a woman owns becomes her husband’s, thus Antoinette is totally dispossessed and all she owns is now Rochester’s including this estate on the island.

As a matter of fact, what Antoinette cares for is not money or property, which she is willing to give all away, if she could find a tender heart to lean on, someone to love and protect her. To her bad luck, her high hopes in her husband, whom she does fall in love with, are shattered as his feelings towards her do not go beyond carnal desires, of which he seemingly has had enough. “I did not love her,” he squarely says, “I was thirsty for her, but that is not love” (p. 93).

Like Abu Qais, Assad, and Marwan, Antoinette is thoroughly bereaved, alienated, victimized by those around her. Her husband himself admits his mixed up feelings not only towards her, but also towards everything in what he sees as an exotic and irrational place. Despite the beauty of the green hills and rivers, all he sees is “Sombre people in a sombre place” (p. 68). As if seeing her for the first time during their trip for what is supposed to be their honeymoon, he cannot hide his racist thoughts seeing

“disconcerting [...] long, dark, alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either” (p. 67). For him, “the woman is a stranger. Her pleading expression annoys me” (p. 70), but he needs to tolerate what seems to be a necessary evil. He narrates:

When at last I met her I bowed, smiled, kissed her hand, danced with her. I played the part I was expected to play. She never had anything to do with me at all. Every movement I made was an effort of will and sometimes I wondered that no one noticed this. (pp. 76-77)

In fact, she has already noticed and tried to stop the marriage. Yet, not wanting to go back home empty-handed, he plays the broken-hearted and kisses her, “promising her peace, happiness, safety” (p. 79) in their future life in the dream-like England, the very same promises Kanafani’s protagonists hear about Kuwait. However, once the marriage procedures are done, he is spared this obligation and unravels his real feelings, stripping her of even her name, her identity, and despite her protests, he insists on calling her Bertha, a British name he favors. The devilish Daniel, who introduces himself as her illegal half-brother, turns him totally against her by raising his suspicions about her origin, “from a lecherous, alcoholic father who had sexual relations with black women” (Porter, 1976, pp. 544-545), her morality, and her sanity, thus his obsession of Antoinette’s impurity. She spares no effort to persuade him of Daniel’s lies, painstakingly telling him about her family suffering, her brother’s death, and her mother’s being driven into madness and death, but he, nonetheless, chooses to believe Daniel, who openly blackmails him to keep his information secret. For all this, Porter concludes that Rochester’s business “journey to the Antilles to procure a rich wife is also [...] a journey to [his] heart of darkness” (p. 544) as he unhesitatingly decides that his wife “will be shunned, broken and finally shut away” (p. 545).

The last blow of fate Antoinette receives is when her husband sleeps with Amélie, the black servant, knowing that just a thin partition separates them from Antoinette’s room. Feeling totally betrayed, she refuges to Christophine, the lifelong loyal servant and her surrogate mother, who brings her back that evening totally vanquished. Yet, in a final hopeless attempt to fix the situation, she does try again to solicit some kind of passion asking him if he does not love her at all. His elusive answer, calling her Bertha again, and gripping her arm to take the bottle of rum, her refuge to escape this merciless reality, drive her crazy, so she bites his arm wildly and smashes the bottle. He recalls:

[She] stood with the broken glass in her hand and murder in her eyes. [...] Then she cursed me comprehensively, [...] and it was like a dream in the large unfurnished room with the candles flickering and this red-eyed wild-haired stranger who was my wife shouting obscenities at me (Rhys, p. 148).

This is how Antoinette becomes forever Bertha, Rochester’s mad wife, and all Christophine’s pleas to let her go or at least try to love her again fall on deaf ears. He takes a vow neither to touch her nor to leave her touched by any other man on earth. She will always be “My lunatic, my mad girl” (p. 166), and, not unlike Kanafani’s

protagonists, “she will not laugh in the sun again” (165). The sad irony is that he has become rich because of her and decides to sell this house and land where he has victimized her, which shows their relation not only as that of male and female, but also, according to Paula Anderson (1982), that of “the colonizer and the colonized.” Anderson sees that his callousness “heightens our contempt for his alienated psycho-sexuality and psycho-cultural myopia” (p. 57). Rose Kamel (1995) contends that Antoinette’s “status as a Creole has made a chimera of truth and justice for Rochester to toy with while he retains a colonist’s power to extinguish her” (p. 11). Consequently, seen by her husband as “creatural, therefore subhuman” (p. 17), Antoinette, or Bertha, is “imprisoned in the ‘cardboard world’ of Victorian Thornfield, analogous to the barns and cellars used to confine recalcitrant slaves” (p. 12). She does not know how long she has been locked up in this small room, disbelieving that she is in England and becoming literally a prisoner of both place and time, seeing nobody except the servant who looks after her. Having no mirror at her disposal, she has never had a glimpse of her own image. However, she sometimes steals the key and roams the house, knowing that the people there believe that the house is haunted and refer to her as a ghost. Totally crestfallen and without any ray of hope out of this oppressive life imprisonment, she thinks, “ Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” (Rhys, p. 190), thus holding a lighted candle and proceeding to burn everything down. Rhys leaves the dramatic scene of flames swallowing everything to Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*. Deprived of her identity and imprisoned in a place as an alien, Antoinette finds purgatory in fire. According to Carl Plasa, she sees the flames ‘beautiful’ because she “associates warmth and fire with the West Indies, with passion, with freedom, with the past” (p. 53).

It might be true that nationalities and borderlines are illusions fabricated and implanted in people’s minds by super political figures or powers, as Benedict Anderson (1991) contends in his groundbreaking book *Imagined Communities* or as Michael Ondaatje (1992) depicts in his masterpiece, *The English Patient*, but one’s own house or land is a totally different story. It is one’s life, one’s past, one’s personal and family memories, and one’s roots, without which one might be totally estranged, disheartened, and lost. In this sense, to their dwellers, places become sacred; they simply mean life. Edward Said (2000) asserts that, "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (p. 173).

This explains how the protagonists in both Kanafani’s and Rhys’s works are doomed to such a catastrophic end once they are uprooted from their dwellings and deprived of their identity, becoming outsiders in hostile surroundings. The palm trees to Antoinette’s mother are the olive trees to Abu Qais. Their ineluctable journeys away from them is a real diaspora that leads the former to collapse, getting literally mad and passing away, and forces the latter to lose all connection with reality for ten years, hallucinating while in the desert, and accepting to embark on a trip too dangerous for a sane person to take. They are as Paula Anderson describes Antoinette’s family, “unable to abandon their memories, of a past-life style – to let go of ‘the old time’ . Theirs is the tragedy of the passing of an era, and the passing from power” (p. 60).

Alternative places could be harsh and indifferent. The desert in *Men in the Sun* has no mercy with its sweltering heat and drought, totally careless about those who might live or pass there. Even for Rochester, their estate on the island is his enemy and on

her side, but for her it is on nobody's side. She loved it as a child because she had nothing else to love, but discovered long time ago that "it is as indifferent as this God you call on so often" (Rhys, p. 130). The God she has been told about in the convent is not the same one she has known outside. Where is the justice her husband talks about when the world turns into a jail where she is ruthlessly marginalized and tortured? This echoes Abul Khayzuran's words when, though his arduous experience has turned him into an atheist, he prays that the three men are still alive in the tank. He pleads, "O almighty God, you who have never been with me, who have never looked in my direction, whom I have never believed in, can you possibly be here this time? Just this time" (Kanafani, p. 44). Sorrowfully enough, He seemingly was not.

Conclusion

In brief, in both works, the protagonists' great misfortune is having been born Creole or Palestinian during a time of big historical incidents, which lead to their ghastly dispossession and gruesome death. Both Kanafani and Rhys seem to insinuate that the farther one is compelled to get from one's roots and identity, the more one's anguish, abandonment, and irreparable loss. The protagonists are thus turned into perfect agonized souls imprisoned not only spiritually "in a past which no longer exists and dreaming of a future which they have neither the knowledge nor the power to bring into being" (Harlow, p. 104), but even physically, ending up "as poor and anonymous in death as they had been in life" (Siddiq, p. 11). In a word, Abu Qais, Assad, and Marwan, not unlike Antoinette, are perfect voiceless victims of historical powers that deprive them of their identity and their right to live in dignity no matter how loud they scream or how hard they knock on the walls of their prison, be it a desert or England, a metal tank or a stone attic.

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