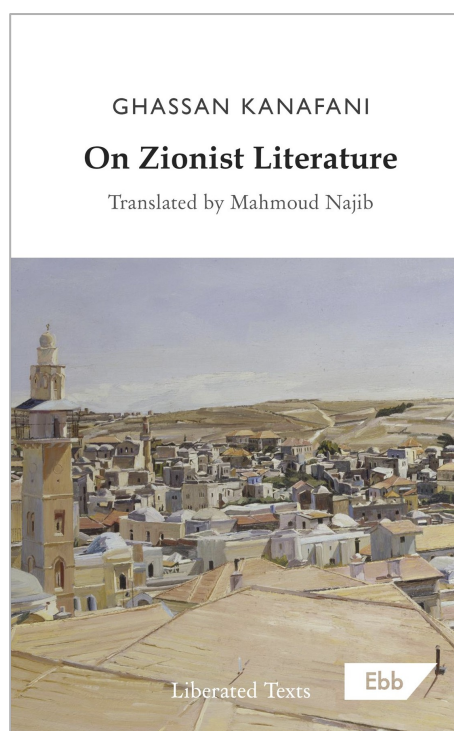
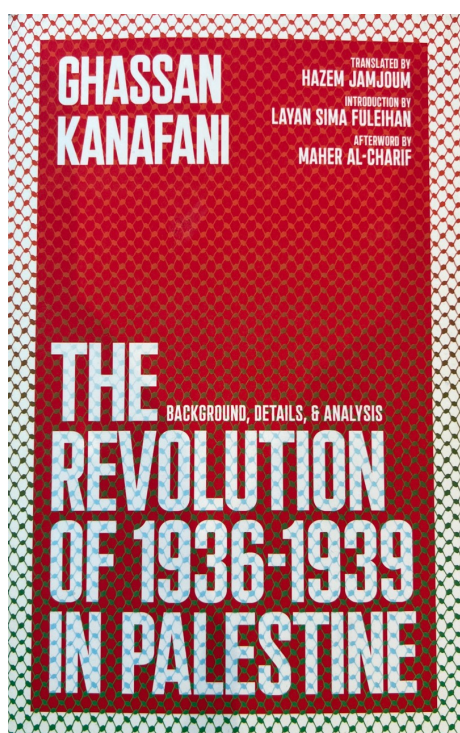


BOOK REVIEW: Ghassan Kanafani's History Lessons

Jay Murphy

Ghassan Kanafani, *The Revolution of 1936–1939 in Palestine, Background, Details, Analysis*, translated by Hazem Jamjoum, with an introduction by Layan Sima Fuleihan and an afterword by Maher Charif (1804 Books, New York, 2023)

Ghassan Kanafani, *On Zionist Literature*, translated by Mahmoud Najib (Liberated Texts/Ebb Books, Oxford, 2022)



Reading Ghassan Kanafani's treatise on the 'great Arab revolt', *The Revolution of 1936–1939 in Palestine* produces a remarkable sense of *déjà vu*. It could have impressed many in that way already at the time of its writing in 1969, in the immediate aftermath of the June 1967 'Six Day War', or *naksa* ('setback'), in which Israel occupied East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, the Egyptian Sinai Desert and the Syrian Golan Heights – not only a loss of territory but Kanafani entered that strong Marxist tradition of deepened reflection, of personal and political

an expulsion of over another 300,000 Palestinians. Written in a time of apparent defeat, reorganisation following a period of frustration or debacle, that produced so many of that tradition's classics – V I Lenin's *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899), Antonio Gramsci's *The Prison Notebooks* (1929–1935), or Marx's *Capital* (1867) itself. What Kanafani produced was a quintessential example of what Lenin had called the 'concrete analysis of a concrete situation', what he judged as 'the living soul' of Marxism.¹ Kanafani had been instrumental in the development of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and its adoption of revolutionary Marxism as a strategy, eclipsing its prior devotion to pan-Arab nationalism in the form of the Arab National Movement (ANM), though pan-Arab revolution remained a key credo. Kanafani had crafted the PFLP's 1969 platform that set out that founding transition.

The most sustained revolt to date in the modern Middle East, 'the revolution of 1936–1939' resulted in a strengthening of the colonial powers and the dramatic increase and consolidation of even more firmly militarised Zionist movements. It was Kanafani's conclusion that this foreshadowed and predetermined the catastrophe, the *nakba*, of 1948. Arguably similar dynamics dominated the *naksa* of 1967. The long-term repercussions of the 7 October 2023 Operation Al-Aqsa attacks are still to complete, though some have drawn similar downbeat observations – that reaction is triumphant, likely to usher in an era of 'impending normalisation', an ultimate pacification of the Palestinian struggle and repression of the forces of the 'Arab spring' throughout the Arab world, those peoples suppressed 'under their autocratic regimes, protected economically by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, and securitized by Israel'.² Yet 'the great Arab revolt' laid the basis for the later liberation struggle, and the aftermath of the 7 October attacks has revealed a profound Israeli dependence and isolation as never before, even as its image-management internationally collapsed. In this desperate effort on Israel's part to complete ever more quickly what was begun in 1948, many also attest to this period as a high-water mark of Zionism, beginning to see its end. Historian Ilan Pappé, for example, has said: 'I'm willing to say with some caution that this is the last phase of Zionism. Historically, such developments in ideological movements, whether they are colonials or empires, it is usually the final chapter [that is] the ruthless one, the most ambitious one. And then it's too much and then they fall and collapse.'³

¹ V I Lenin, 'Kommunismus', in *Collected Works*, Vol 31, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1920, p 166

² Jeff Halper, 'Global Palestine: Israel, the Palestinians, the Middle East and the World After the American Attack on Iran', *Counterpunch*, 24 June 2025, www.counterpunch.org/2025/06/24/global-palestine/?fbclid=IwY2xjawLOcORleHRuA2FlbQlXMQBicmlkETFsZDdid3h5SkZ0UFVrcHFAR6uOzWAH2ZlJ83QRxSuxQ8ptS3DaimDWFmw3vflsKTilc9zTu7Yi-QMiNDKyw_aem_1qhOphoicqDTM5SIqJfew; see also Halper's discussion with Mouin Rabbani and Abed Takriti, 'Global Palestine: What is Happening to the Middle East and Where is the Region Heading?', ICAHD UK Webinar, *YouTube*, 25 June 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHst_J5t1L0. Both accessed 20 October 2025.

³ Anaealla Safdar, 'Israeli historian Ilan Pappé: "This is the last phase of Zionism"', *Al Jazeera*, 14 January 2025, www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/14/israeli-historian-ilan-pappe-this-is-the-last-phase-of-zionism, accessed 20 October 2025

Kanafani's contribution was prematurely ended at age thirty-six by a Mossad car bomb in Beirut on 8 July 1972, but if he had lived to see Operation Al-Aqsa and the ferocious genocidal counterattack, he may well have named these same components or 'holy family' of reaction – above all the machinations and control of western imperialism/colonialism, for Israel was an implant of settler-colonialism, but also the international support network of Zionism, the various monarchies and reactionary Arab regimes, and the collaborationist native Palestinian bourgeoisie. It was the innovation of Arab Marxism, or Marxism-Leninism (since it was closely following Lenin's take), to name imperialism as the primary enemy – so the movement for revolutionary unity was strongly rooted in class analysis, not any form of religious belief, nativism, naive nationalism or ethnic identity. This transformed the content of its Arab nationalism, since for Kanafani any credible confrontation with colonialism found it relied on the mobilisation of the popular classes of working class and peasantry.⁴ It was in this sense that this movement was still reliant on the creation of unity found in revolutionary nationalism throughout the Arab world. Kanafani remains a key resource and thinker for this, given his early opposition to the notion of a separate Palestinian entity adjoining the Jewish state, foreshadowing the PFLP rejection of the 1993–1999 Oslo Accord.⁵

Not merely a record of defeat, reconstructed from many primary sources and contemporary accounts, *The Revolution of 1936–1939* is also a confirmation of extraordinary resilience and determination on the part of the native population, their fighting ability and of their analysis. As Israeli journalist Amira Hass has concluded, current events demonstrate that 'the Palestinians were right from the beginning of the '30s and the '40s, when they said Israel is a colonial entity or a settler colonial entity'.⁶ So Kanafani's account draws a line into the present. It is no accident that *The Revolution of 1936–1939* was almost as common a sight as *keffiyehs* in the 2023–2024 student 'intifada' on US and UK campuses. Kanafani labels his sections simply 'The Workers', 'The Peasants', 'The Intellectuals', 'The Revolution'. He was consciously setting out the dynamics of the establishment of the Zionist state and the continuing resistance to it. Kanafani puts this into a larger, determinative context of the transformation from a largely feudal,

⁴ Many of Kanafani's crucial political writings have just recently been translated into English – see *Ghassan Kanafani: Selected Political Writings*, Louis Brehony and Tahrir Hamdi, eds, Ouroobi Shetewi, translations ed, Pluto Press, Las Vegas and London, 2024. For an abbreviated review, see Jay Murphy, 'Ghassan Kanafani's "Guerrilla Rhetoric," Then and Now', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 28 June 2025, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/ghassan-kanafanis-guerrilla-rhetoric-then-and-now>, accessed 20 October 2025.

⁵ See Ghassan Kanafani, 'The Specter of the Palestinian State', translated by Hazem Jamjoum, *Fikra* 180, 4 June 2024, <https://fikra-magazine.com/article/180>. This was originally published in the PFLP magazine *Al-Hadaf (The Target)*, 6 March 1971, pp 6–7. For a short history of the PFLP and the Palestinian left, see Francesco Saverio Leopardi, 'The Left Has Played a Key Role in the Palestinian Struggle', *Jacobin*, 2 July 2024, <https://jacobin.com/2024/07/palestine-left-pflp-habash-fatah-plo-hamas>. Both accessed 20 October 2025.

⁶ "'Resist the Normalization of Evil": Israeli Reporter Amira Hass on Palestine and the Role of Journalism', *Democracy Now*, 17 May 2024, www.democracynow.org/2024/5/17/amira_hass_israel_palestine_gaza, accessed 20 October 2025



A Palestinian girl passes by a mural about Ghassan Kanafani in Dheisheh refugee camp, Bethlehem, 12 May 2018, photo by Anne Paq, courtesy of Activestills Collection

agrarian peasant economy into an industrialised capitalist one, with the reins of this momentous change in the hands of the Zionist movement and the Jewish communities in Palestine.

Consequently, Kanafani writes, when calls for reconciliation came out, they were almost invariably from the upper portions of the urban Arab bourgeoisie, who were attempting (however unsuccessfully) to combine their interests into that of Zionism and British imperialism. So despite the strength of the mass movements in Palestine and their mutuality with the masses of the neighbouring Arab countries, this promise ‘to broaden the range of revolutionary possibilities in Arab countries’ (p 3) led the Arab regimes to oppose and corral the Palestinian national movement, a dynamic that continues to this day.

Not only did Palestinian workers have to face a violent Zionist movement with increasingly fascist forms of organisation and methods, but they were also hammered by terrorism and assassinations from the ‘feudal–religious leadership’ that could not bear losing control of the Indigenous labour movement. Even with the outbreak of the mass revolt in 1936, this feudal–religious leadership remained the leading force. Much of this was due to the vicissitudes of the Palestine Communist Party, which, despite its dedication to the ‘Arabization of the Party’ and prioritisation of the ‘Arab national question’ at its seventh congress in 1930–1931, was unable to achieve it. Symptomatic of this was its splits in 1936, in 1948 and again in 1965, each time due to conflict with those who desired a more ‘constructive’ role in relation to Zionism (pp 13–14). Kanafani’s description helps one understand how difficult the transition was of a group like the PFLP in the 1960s towards Marxism, given the disappointment with the Arab communist

parties in general, and the Soviet Union itself (as Kanafani notes, *Izvestia* in 1946 is comparing the 'Jewish struggle' in Palestine to that of the Bolsheviks before 1917).

It is especially when one looks at the situation in rural areas, Kanafani argued, that the conflict appeared as one primarily of nationalities or the 'national question'. Despite a small number of settlers at the time (only 6,752), by 1930 they had managed to expropriate around one million dunams – about a third of all arable land. Kanafani writes, 'this entailed the impoverishment of the peasants and Bedouin at an unprecedented scale and rate' (p 15). Although there were British Mandatory laws designed to protect against forced eviction and the Arab peasants being forced to sell, these rarely had any reality. The agrarian mode of production, not only in the Arab world, is generally one of a 'deeply rooted social, religious, and ritualistic way of life', so the threat to its existence, Kanafani writes, 'appeared primarily as a purely national confrontation'. Faced with this 'triple nightmare' of the violence of Zionist colonisation, the patterns of Arab feudal land ownership, and heavy taxation from the British Mandate authorities, peasants in the uprisings of 1929 and 1933 often sold their small landholdings to obtain weapons to fight (p 16). As one of the testimonies in the *Collection of Arab Testimonies in Palestine before the British Royal Commission* (1938) attested, 'The peasant class was in fact the only class obliged to help raise all the taxes in Palestine... the policy pursued by the government aims to place the peasant in an economic position that ensures the establishment of a Jewish national homeland' (quoted on p 19). Zionist practices such as 'exclusively Jewish labor' and 'buy only Jewish products' further pummelled the lower Palestinian classes who bore the brunt of this Judaisation of the economy. Kanafani further completes this socio-economic picture by describing the *effendiyya*, an urban grouping that lived off the land they leased, and interest on loans, to the peasantry, and the poorest of the poor, the Bedouin, who made up as much as 35 per cent of the population. This Bedouin 'class' was described as in 'near constant hunger, which puts them in a state of rage consistently teetering on the edge of armed rebellion' (quoted on p 21).

Palestine participated fully in the *nahda*, or Arab cultural resurgence of the early twentieth century, even despite a marked lack of support and discrimination by the Mandate in often sparse, institutionalised education. Its location as a kind of crossroads furthered a vibrant migration of intellectuals and artists from Cairo and Beirut, and gave rise to a lively publishing environment. Ever attuned to class, Kanafani described urban intellectuals of the time, descended from the mercantile or landed, bourgeois or petty-bourgeois families, as calling for a 'bourgeois revolution' that had no real material basis. Paradoxically, courted by the feudalism leadership, they were left with more freedom of action than if they were 'fettered by the kinds of real material conditions that would constrain a bourgeoisie' (p 25). Consequently, with this room for manoeuvre, Kanafani concluded they were able to be more progressive than their counterparts in the rest of the Arab world, even 'disproportionately active... when compared to similar groups reckoning with the classical conditions of a national liberation struggle' (p 26). This depiction of a population simultaneously characterised by systemic underdevelopment and

immiseration, constantly under threat, yet avant-garde culturally and politically, would continue to characterise Palestinians many decades later. A tradition of popular poetry stayed in constant step with the grievances and vagaries of the peasantry, holding the 'kind of power', Kanafani argued, of the mass media today. With the contradictions often even enveloping the rural imam, Kanafani writes, 'We do not know of a single Palestinian writer or intellectual in this period under study who did not, to some extent, join in the call to resist the colonial enemy' (p 26). In fact, they would 'stoke the flames of the armed uprising and make it integral to the popular heritage of the masses' (p 28). As Nazareth-based poet Tawfiq Zayyad attested, the later 'resistance literature', or *adab al-muhqawama* of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, a term Kanafani coined, about poets such as Zayyad, Mahmoud Darwish and Samih al-Qasim within Israel proper, was very much an 'extension' of these earlier poets (p 29).

The outbreak of the revolution itself was a violent coming to a head of the circumstances Kanafani described, encapsulated in the three demands of the revolt: an immediate end to Jewish immigration; prohibition of land transfers to Jews from Arab landowners; and the creation of a democratic government with majority Arab representation, given they were the majority of the population (p 40). Class analysis continues to be prioritised as Kanafani treats the rebellion itself, although, illustrating some of the complexity if not contradictions inherent in Marxian philosophy itself, he stresses the critical role of a singular personality, emphasising 'an appreciation of the particular place' (p 41) held by Sheik Izz al-Din al-Qassem. Qassem, for whom armed brigades claim their namesake down to today, was an early exponent of armed struggle and a veteran of anticolonial combats against the Italian aggression against Libya, the French occupation of Syria, and, after his arrival in Haifa in the 1920s, organiser of assaults against British and Zionist military and police installations as well as settlements. One of the primary triggers of the 1936 revolt was al-Qassem's assassination in 1935, after a ten-day manhunt, occasioning mass demonstrations and strikes throughout Palestinian and Syrian cities.

Kanafani argues that the Qassamist movement put the traditional leadership of Palestine to a 'test they could no longer avoid' (p 41). Rather than dismiss this movement due to its religious origins, Kanafani recognises its 'dialectical relationship' with the anticolonial struggle, and how it threw down a gauntlet for any anticolonial position. Using the language of Guevarism that would be so central to the Popular Front, Kanafani cites the last words of Qassem as demonstrating that Qassem 'appreciated the role he himself played as the explosive force fueling a forward revolutionary *foco*' (p 43). Underlining Kanafani's conviction that any potent challenge to colonialism had to rely on the working masses, he writes: 'The only people who marched in al-Qassem's funeral procession were the poor.' Qassem had helped ignite 'the rising tide of the popular will to fight' (p 45).

In a characterisation of the conflict that reverberates today, World Zionist Organisation chairman Chaim Weizmann, on 23 April 1936, posed it as one of the forces of construction versus those of destruction, the cause of Zionist colonisation being that of progress itself. With only an 'insipid alliance' to pretend to lead them, the native Palestinians 'had nothing protecting

them except the weapons they bore' (p 49). These years of the revolt were the decisive ones in which Britain threw its considerable weight of massive violence in favour of the Zionist presence. Placing most of historic Palestine under martial law, Britain carried out widespread home demolitions (destroying a large part of the city of Yafa and its surrounding suburbs), bombardment by air, and promulgated draconian punishment for the rebels that would be all too familiar under the ensuing Zionist occupation. These mandated, for example, a six-year prison sentence for possession of a firearm; twelve years for possession of a bomb; five years hard labour for having twelve rounds of ammunition; eight months for giving British soldiers wrong directions; nine years for possession of small explosives (p 50). Despite the savagery of the repression and a dithering, easily divided 'official' leadership, Kanafani writes: 'At no point in the entire history of the Palestinian struggle was the armed popular revolution as close to victory as it was in those months stretching from the end of 1937 to the beginning of 1939... The high esteem with which the masses held up the revolution became the primary force across the country.' (p 57) Unfortunately for the Palestinians, this only solidified the resolve of the British to rely ever more greatly on the violence of the paramilitary forces of the Zionist organisations to control the situation for them.

By the time Britain entered the Second World War in September 1939, this severe repression featuring decimation of the revolt's leaders had been 'devastating' (p 60). This combination of treachery of Arab regimes in collusion with the imperial powers, inconsistent, conflicting native leadership, and overwhelming, superior violence would be a pattern repeated in the later two intifadas. There are other histories of the Arab revolt,⁷ but Kanafani's is one of a political strategist integrating its lessons. In Kanafani's historical account, it becomes evident in part where his constant insistence on organisation and cadre-formation throughout his political writings is derived, and why armed struggle is the basic fulcrum of revolutionary unity and the imperial powers the primary opponent. Kanafani regularly ranked the national liberation struggle of the Vietnamese as the strongest, and the Palestinian cause as the weakest, due to their factors of organisation. The solidification of the Zionist economic and military presence, through a process of what Kanafani describes as a precursor to US 'Vietnamisation' some thirty years later, was such that the establishment of the state of Israel, from late 1947 to mid-1948, was 'only the epilogue' to the far longer bloody struggle of 1936–1939.

Kanafani's *The Revolution of 1936–1939*, far from illustrating a hopeless acquiescence in defeat, like Kanafani's response to the defeat/*hazima* of June 1967, showed, rather, that only 'the creation of a fighting people'⁸ was the key to the liberation of Palestine – indeed, 1967 was

⁷ See, for instance, Ted Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt: The 1936–1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past*, University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, Arkansas, 2003; Oren Kessler, *Palestine 1936: The Great Revolt and the Roots of the Middle East Conflict*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland, 2023; and Matthew Hughes, *Britain's Pacification of Palestine: The British Army, the Colonial State, and the Arab Revolt, 1936–1939*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014. Hughes's book emphasises the immense destructiveness of the British Mandate response.

⁸ Ghassan Kanafani, 'Resistance is the Essence', in *Ghassan Kanafani: Selected Political Writings*, op cit, p 58



Ghassan Kanafani in his office in Beirut, pre-1972, courtesy of Assafir/*The Electronic Intifada* (12 July 2017)

seen as ‘the final impetus towards a higher mode of thinking’.⁹ Kanafani was indomitable – as he stated weeks before his assassination, acknowledging more defeats and massacres awaited his cause before its final victory: ‘We know we will overcome this stage in the future and that the loyalty of the masses to the revolution will be stronger than before.’¹⁰ The experiences of 1936–1939, of 1948, of the June 1967 war and of ‘Black September’ in 1970 had laid the basis for the March PFLP report in the year of his assassination, in which Kanafani foresaw a ‘new stage’ of struggle which ‘requires a popular people’s war that stretches for tens of years’.¹¹ Kanafani ‘was always busy working, as if death was just around the corner’,¹² in what PFLP secretary-general Dr George Habash called Kanafani’s ‘race against time’.¹³ A key strategist, organiser and spokesman, he was already recognised in his lifetime as one of the pre-eminent Palestinian novelists and short story writers, outside of his exhausting dedication as editor and

⁹ Louis Brehony and Tahrir Hamdi, ‘Introduction: The Revolutionary Journey of Ghassan Kanafani’, in *Ghassan Kanafani: Selected Political Writings*, op cit, p 12

¹⁰ ‘Ghassan Kanafani interviewed in 1972: “Anti-imperialism gives impetus to socialism if it does not stop fighting in the middle of battle”’, *Samidoun* – Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network, 11 July 2022, <https://samidoun.net/2022/07/ghassan-kanafani-interviewed-in-1972-anti-imperialism-gives-impetus-to-socialism-if-it-does-not-stop-fighting-in-the-middle-of-the-battle>, accessed 20 October 2025.

¹¹ ‘Tasks of the New Stage – 1972 (English)’, *Historical Documents of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine*, 7 December 2016, <https://pflp-documents.org/tasks-of-the-new-stage-1972-english>, accessed 20 October 2025

¹² Anni Kanafani, ‘Preface to the Current Edition, 2022’, in *On Zionist Literature*, p xxiii

¹³ Habash, quoted in Louis Allday, “‘A Race Against Time’: The life and death of Ghassan Kanafani”, *Mondoweiss*, 11 September 2023, <https://mondoweiss.net/2023/09/a-race-against-time-the-life-and-death-of-ghassan-kanafani>, accessed 20 October 2025

contributor to a number of journals and newspapers of the Arab National Movement and the PFLP (he was editor-in-chief of *Al-Hadaf/The Target* of the PFLP from July 1969 until his assassination). Author of the 1962 *Men in the Sun* (made into the film *The Dupes* in 1972), *All That's Left to You* (1966), *Umm Sa'ad* (1969), *Returning to Haifa* (1970), and other works, Kanafani insisted it was literature (and the practical communion with the refugee children he had worked with as an aide with UNRWA) that led him to his political views, instead of the reverse. While dedicated to what he never tired of considering the 'highest form' of struggle, the armed struggle,¹⁴ Kanafani maintained that the 'extreme importance of the cultural form of resistance is no less valuable than armed resistance itself'.¹⁵

In *On Zionist Literature*, first published in 1967, Kanafani carries out an operation of ideological unmasking familiar in the Anglophone world to readers of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall in the UK, and Fredric Jameson and Edward Said in the US. A key difference is that Kanafani considered this an integral part of the Palestinian armed struggle, without which his writing would be 'empty'.¹⁶ *On Zionist Literature* is very consciously a programme of 'know your enemy', as in what Anthony Wilden termed 'guerrilla rhetoric' – 'you must know what your enemy knows, why and how he knows it, and how to contest him on any ground'.¹⁷ With more of the breadth of his work available in English, Kanafani no longer appears only as a key Palestinian literary figure, as perhaps the pre-eminent Palestinian novelist, but comparable to figures such as Aimé Césaire, the poet-playwright who was also an essential critic of colonialism and mayor of Fort-de-France in Martinique for fifty-six years; or Roque Dalton, the Salvadoran poet widely credited with changing the direction of Central American poetry, a prolific critic and journalist who was also a trained guerrilla with the People's Revolutionary Army; or Vladimir Mayakovsky, the frenetic poet of the Russian revolution, inspiring troop movements to the front, who still found time to write *How to Make Verse* (1926). As an anticolonial voice of the Global South, these new translations place Kanafani in the company of Amílcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon or José Carlos Mariátegui, who all saw that the task of revolution, in Ernesto 'Che' Guevara's words, was 'to build the new man and woman'.¹⁸ Mariátegui, in Peru in the 1920s, outlined a very similar process to Kanafani in terms of culture – Mariátegui divided the 'literature of

¹⁴ For instance, in Kanafani, 'The Underlying Synthesis of the Revolution', in *Ghassan Kanafani: Selected Political Writings*, op cit, p 169

¹⁵ Ghassan Kanafani, *Palestinian Resistance Literature Under Occupation, 1948–1967*, Institute for Arab Research, Beirut, 1981, p 13; quoted in Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, Methuen, New York, 1987, p 11

¹⁶ In a conversation with his niece, see Louis Allday, "'A Race Against Time": The life and death of Ghassan Kanafani', op cit

¹⁷ Anthony Wilden, *System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange*, 2nd ed, Routledge, New York and London, 1980 [1972], pp lvii–lviii; for a recent critique of Wilden's once influential work, see Seb Franklin, 'The Pattern and the Police: Carceral Systems and Structures', *Parapraxis*, 27 October 2024, www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/the-pattern-and-the-police, accessed 20 October 2025

¹⁸ See Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, 'Man and Socialism in Cuba' on The Marxists Internet Archive, written and first published March 1965, www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1965/03/man-socialism.htm, accessed 20 October 2025. The Popular Front literature took up this credo, often reversing the order of the pronouns, calling for a 'new woman and man'.

a country into three periods: colonial, cosmopolitan and national... in the third period, it shapes and expresses its own personality and feelings'.¹⁹ Similarly, Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), had theorised three stages of 'national culture' or consciousness – the first, a period of slavish imitation of foreign, usually European models; the second, a rediscovery and valorisation of Indigenous traditions; and the third phase, when a new, self-aware art is created, emerging from yet not dependent on native models. This culminating, decolonising phase was what Fanon called 'the fighting phase', where the writer or artist becomes 'the mouthpiece of a new reality in action'.²⁰

On Zionist Literature shows the potent role an activity purportedly as harmless as literary criticism can have in knowing one's enemy. In looking into the novels of George Eliot, Arthur Koestler, Leon Uris, James Michener, and many others, Kanafani details how this nascent literature or ideology of the Zionist movement preceded and prepared its success 'on the ground' in historic Palestine. Kanafani is writing as a prodigious multitasker, using sources as he can find them (often in his wife's Denmark, given the ban on Israeli literature in Lebanon), so this edition at times corrects his citations, and ferrets out the copies Kanafani must have used. Kanafani deals with this inexorable advance in Zionist literature in stages. Primary in this, according to Kanafani, is the 'political instrumentalization of a traditional religious matter' (p 12) in the transformation of the character of the Hebrew language. With all sorts of Jewish intellectual and literary production written in the languages of the countries in which they resided, Hebrew was generally restricted to religious ritual. 'Turning Hebrew into a national language', writes Kanafani, 'changed its literary content as well' (p 13). Thus a 'religious character' of ancient mythological roots becomes a 'political' one – 'only this time, he is without a god, a predestined fate or spiritual objectives'. Increasingly, the Jewish literary character that pops up is one of 'absolute power and purity'. A salient later example and culmination of this would be the hero of Leon Uris's *Exodus* (1958), a figure of 'absolute virtue physiologically, psychologically and politically' (p 14). A character like Ari Ben Canaan today would appear simply comical, if this representation of 'power and purity' had not been transferred, and still current in the ongoing lethal pathology of the Israeli state.

Looking at the enormous span of Jewish history, Kanafani argued that it was not in periods of repression but in times of relative 'reprieve' and freedom that notions which would lead to Zionism flourished, creating the paradox of a split between 'spiritual and civil authorities' of a 'religious order and another made up of a socio-economically privileged class, which advanced a Jewish supremacist position – often on religious grounds' (p 20). The 'relative freedom' of Jewish communities between 1815 and 1855 in Poland and Russia, an era of *Haskalah* (enlightenment), and the situation of Jews in England in the second half of the nineteenth century, are just a few of Kanafani's copious examples. This expanded freedom in cultural

¹⁹ José Carlos Mariátegui, 'Literature on Trial', in *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality*, Marjory Uquidi, trans, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, 1971, pp 190–191

²⁰ Frantz Fanon, "On National Culture," in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York, 1963 [1961], p 223

expression frequently ‘took on a racist character at the hands of the socio-economically privileged Jewish class’, underlining Kanafani’s primary point that ‘oppression was not what gave rise to the Zionist movement; the opposite seems to be closer to the truth’ (p 21). It was generally Jews of privileged status who eschewed the openings of integration. A continuation and expansion of such times of ‘reprieve’ could have been the demand of the Zionist movement; instead it ‘took the opposite position – for racist purposes – by claiming Jewish superiority and refusing to integrate, which in turn always contributed to undermining the prospects of co-existence’ (p 21). This created a mirror-image Zionism of ‘mere inversion’, ultimately establishing a ‘*negative Judaism*’ wherein ‘lies a psychological complex which would be furthered to the greatest possible extent’ (p 22).

This quandary of supposed superiority via exclusion was reflected for Kanafani in figures as various as the poet Heinrich Heine and in Sigmund Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), where Freud argued that Moses ‘gave them a religion that gave them confidence to such a degree that they came to believe to be superior to all other peoples. They survived as a result of this superiority...’ (quoted on p 25). An ability to survive, Kanafani notes, which becomes an ability to ‘violently invade’ based on the same notion of superiority (p 26). What began as a Davidian religious character becomes the Shylockian figure, followed by the doubter, the complainer, the conqueror, and finally ‘the political David... a figure of absolute power, virtue, and infallibility, before whom the entire world appears like the ghost of Goliath’ (p 26). While there are many books describing the Germanic nationalistic if not fascist roots of ‘political Zionism’, Kanafani’s analysis, while perhaps no less ultimately materialist, is singular in also focusing on Zionism as a ‘psychological complex’, much as the psychoanalytic critic Jacqueline Rose would do decades later in *States of Fantasy* (1996), *The Question of Zion* (2005) and *The Last Resistance* (2007). Rose wrote of Zionism’s strange span from ‘abjection to omnipotence’ – ‘[b]ecause it always knew somewhere that what it was doing was not feasible, Zionism also knew – indeed proclaims – that it would, if need be, defy the will of the world, be not just forceful but omnipotent’.²¹ Rose complexly documented so many of the internal critics and dissenters from Zionism, the tendency Benjamin Netanyahu once dismissed as ‘the Jewish inability to reconcile oneself to the permanent need for Jewish power’.²² As both Rose and Kanafani show, this complex would long predate the Holocaust, and in the creation of Israel install a tale of constant displacement where the ‘enemy of Jews turn into the shades of past persecution, each one at once real and unreal, infinitely dangerous and a ghost’.²³ Arab ‘aggression’, it follows, is not a response to colonisation and land theft, but a ‘challenge to the Jewish people not to capitulate to their own past’.²⁴

²¹ Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2005, p 118

²² Ibid, p 125

²³ Ibid, pp 130–131

²⁴ Ibid, p 132

Kanafani tracked the conflicting status of Jews in England in the nineteenth century, between novels presenting them as virtuous figures, such as Maria Edgeworth's *Harrington* (1817) and Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819), and contrary to the social integration response of politician and twice prime minister Benjamin Disraeli. In Disraeli's *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy* (1833), he 'showcases a Jewish Zionist hero around half a century before the official birth of the Zionist movement in Basel', a novel Kanafani characterises as 'crudely racist' (pp 33–34). In it, Disraeli notoriously proclaimed 'race is all... there is no other truth' (quoted on p 34). Disraeli's novel inspired George Eliot, who took issue with its primary character's racism, to write *Daniel Deronda* (1876), a novel, in literary scholar Edgar Rosenberg's words, which 'rectifies' Disraeli's Zionism by depicting Palestine as 'a politically expedient means of gathering Jews from the Diaspora' (quoted on p 35). Eliot sought to avoid the overt racism of Disraeli, which made her agenda all the more effective as a 'Zionist action plan' (p 37). Kanafani observes that Eliot was assimilating the Jewish 'superiority complex' into Zionism, as did Theodor Herzl more explicitly some fifty years later, in his novel *The Old New Land* (1902), likewise cloaking racist premises into 'humanistic garb' (p 42). Indeed, translated into Hebrew, *Daniel Deronda*, Edgar Rosenberg judged, became a 'Zionist Bible' (quoted on p 43).

Kanafani devotes an entire chapter to the character of 'the Wandering Jew', arguing that its changes illustrate the social conditions of Jews in the various periods in which it is produced. Ultimately the result is that 'eternal' or 'wandering' Jew figures, in novels like *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy* and *Daniel Deronda*, illustrate questions of ethnicity and religion that are collapsed into that of race 'under the aegis of a myth of superiority' (p 45). What indicated a kind of sea change is that by the beginning of the twentieth century the 'religious message gave way to a purely political one'. In David Pinsky's 1906 Yiddish play *The Wandering Jew*, for example, the titular character now 'carried weapons and ideas of conquest' (p 53). The turn represented in the transformation of the 'wandering Jew' figure prepared the ground for what Kanafani described as Zionist literature's 'central mission' at the beginning of the twentieth century, 'propelled' by the Zionist political movement that 'provided promotional opportunities without parallel in the history of politically directed art' (p 57). Some of this culminates in a short story such as Swedish writer Pär Lagerkvist's *The Death of Ahasuerus* (1962), where the Wandering Jew arrives in Palestine to die, comparing his suffering to Jesus's own, yet arguing that his own suffering was far greater, even though it establishes the state of Israel, which will serve as 'humanity's true guide' (p 55).

Whereas the characters of *Daniel Deronda*, *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy* or *The Wandering Jew* are propagandists, it was in Herzl's *The Old New Land* where such characters are pushed from fiction into action. By doing so, Herzl's creation faces the problems later characters such as Joseph in Arthur Koestler's *Thieves in the Night* (1946) or Ari Ben Canaan in *Exodus* exemplify, where the many contradictions of the Zionist programme are no longer abstract, but 'clash with the facts', requiring the 'distortion, omission and falsification of history' (pp 59–60). To Kanafani's eye, the proto-Zionist literary works generate the profuse contradictions that political Zionism works

so hard to elude – hence the bizarre conflations or confusions of a book like *Exodus*. Did Jewish historians influence the making of the novel, or did the novel lead Jewish historians? Once regarded as a ‘historical novel’, today Kanafani’s judgment that it was more nothing other than a ‘crude distortion of history’ (p 65) will strike readers as more accurate. Yet, closer to its time of publication, journalist Jon Kimche argued that despite its manifest ‘literary and historical shortcomings’, its ‘image of Israel’ is ‘fixed now more firmly in the minds of generations of our day’ than that of any of the Jewish state’s founding fathers (quoted on p 66). Star-studded Hollywood versions of this illusory vision of Palestine, with its ignorant, barbaric Arabs and exaggeratedly civilising, infallible Zionists – as in *Exodus* (1960) or *Cast a Giant Shadow* (1966) – only compounded the mistake.



Still from *Exodus*, 1960, directed by Otto Preminger, © United Artists 1961, courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive, New York

Though it is not a long work, Kanafani’s detailed itinerary of Jewish exceptionalism and the concomitant Arab inferiority, whether in bestsellers such as James Michener’s *The Source* (1965) or Hollywood epics starring Paul Newman, Kirk Douglas and John Wayne, becomes overwhelming in its depictions of racial caricatures.²⁵ One of the losses in Kanafani’s assassination is that he was unable to extend his analyses to later, still Zionist novelists such as Amos Oz, or David Grossman, and continue to combine, in the Palestinian/Israeli context, criticism as psychological and psychoanalytic as it is rooted in Marxist anticolonialism.

²⁵ In this it resembles the rapid-fire montage of Jayce Salloum and Elia Suleiman’s documentary *Introduction to the End of an Argument* (1990), where the extraordinary stream of Arab/Middle Eastern stereotypes from movies and the mass media appears simply endless.

The profound displacement of scenes and guilt from Nazi Germany onto Palestinian peasants, the self-consciousness before a primarily Western audience, overweening racism rooted in fanciful superiority – the Israeli response to 7 October 2023 exhibits all this and more in an enormous full-blown pathology. Colonial situations have often led to genocide, but this level of atrocity and sociopathy led the journalist, commentator and *Palestine Chronicle* editor Ramzy Baroud to assess that ‘Zionism has descended into a barbaric *modus operandi* that defies conventional academic theories of colonialism or settler colonialism. It cannot be deciphered through typical political analyses of Israel’s internal machinations or shifting global dynamics’; rather, it ‘demands a fundamentally different understanding. This is not a calculated pursuit of resources, strategic dominance, or even mere superiority. Zionism, in its current messianic and malignant form, embodies pure savagery, a contagion that, if unchecked, will poison the entire world.’²⁶ We cannot know if Kanafani’s scalpel-like brilliance would have risen to the occasion, or how much Marxist-derived analysis he would have retained in assessing this type of catastrophe. As the world witnesses once again (not ‘Never again!’) another massive slaughter of a deemed dispensable population, some warn of a ‘Gazafication’ of the globe, where Gaza becomes a ‘mirror’²⁷ of collapse of the post-Second World War ‘rules-based’ international order, its ‘point of no return’.²⁸ As scholar-activist Rabab Abdulhadi commented in introducing a chapter of Kanafani’s political writings: ‘The ongoing Israeli genocide makes writing or engaging in any intellectual activities outside this context completely meaningless.’²⁹ This string of translations sees Kanafani take his place as one of the giants among the thinkers of the Global South. It remains to be seen how the fructification of Kanafani’s life-work continues, is renovated, how it is challenged or replenished.

Jay Murphy edited the anthology *For Palestine* (Writers and Readers, 1993), which Peter Lamborn Wilson described as what an ‘ideal intifada’ would look like. He has written two books on the surrealist artist Antonin Artaud and is currently working on a study of Jean-Paul Sartre, Gilles Deleuze and questions of political organisation.

²⁶ Ramzy Baroud, ‘The audacity of Israel’s Zionist allies echoed when...’, X, 13 April 2025, <https://x.com/RamzyBaroud/status/1911417505681199505>, accessed 20 October 2025

²⁷ Naomi Klein and Rula Jebreal, ‘Gazafication of the Global Order’, Zeteo, *YouTube*, 5 June 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=VzAMto5GDIs, accessed 20 October 2025

²⁸ Saul J Takahashi, ‘Gaza will be the grave of the Western-led world order’, *Al Jazeera*, 17 January 2024, www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/1/17/gaza-will-be-the-grave-of-the-western-led-world-order, accessed 20 October 2025

²⁹ Rabab Abdulhadi, ‘Introduction: From the Ashes of Gaza, a Volcano Erupts’, in *Ghassan Kanafani: Selected Political Writings*, op cit, p 61