

ETHICAL WITNESSING, HOME, AND RETURN IN GHASSAN KANAFANI'S *RETURNING TO HAIFA*: A DECOLONIAL AND RELIGIOUS HUMANITIES READING

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Received: 19-03-2026 | Revised: 19-05-2026 | Accepted: 30-06-2026

ABSTRACT

Palestinian exile in Ghassan Kanafani's fiction deeply reshapes the relationships connecting individuals to home, memory, and historical existence. While existing scholarship has largely emphasized political nationalism, trauma, and structural settler-colonial violence, the ethical dimensions and processes of cultural sacralization sustained within disrupted domestic spaces remain underexplored, particularly in relation to how secular resistance narratives resonate within religious readerships. This article examines how home, memory, and return are represented in *Returning to Haifa* through an integrated framework of settler-colonial studies and the religious humanities. Employing qualitative textual analysis and close reading of both the Arabic original and its English translation, the study focuses on narrative structure, spatial description, and intergenerational dialogue. The analysis shows that home functions not merely as a domestic setting but as a culturally sacralized space where moral attachments endure against colonial erasure. Memory emerges as a form of ethical witnessing, while the transformation of Khaldun into Dov exposes the intimate violence of intergenerational rupture. This study contributes to religious literary studies by demonstrating how Kanafani's secular narrative undergoes religious re-signification within contemporary Muslim horizons of expectation, demonstrating how such a moral reframing is enacted by specific communities of reading through shared ethical imaginaries of dignity (*al-karamah*) and historical continuity.

Keywords: Cultural sacralization; Ethical witnessing; Palestinian literature; Religious humanities; Settler colonialism.

ABSTRAK

*Pengalaman pengasingan yang dialami bangsa Palestina dalam karya-karya Ghassan Kanafani tidak hanya menghadirkan kehilangan wilayah, tetapi juga mengguncang hubungan manusia dengan rumah, memori, dan sejarah hidupnya sendiri. Selama ini, kajian terhadap karya Kanafani lebih banyak dibaca melalui kerangka nasionalisme, trauma, dan kolonialisme pemukim. Namun, dimensi etis yang bekerja di dalam ruang-ruang kehilangan tersebut, serta bagaimana ruang itu memperoleh makna moral yang lebih dalam, masih belum banyak mendapat perhatian. Artikel ini membahas representasi rumah, memori, dan kepulauan dalam *Returning to Haifa* dengan memadukan perspektif *settler-colonial studies* dan *religious humanities*. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui analisis tekstual dan pembacaan dekat terhadap teks asli bahasa Arab serta terjemahan bahasa Inggrisnya. Analisis difokuskan pada struktur naratif, penggambaran ruang, dan dialog antargenerasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa rumah dalam novel ini tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai latar tempat, tetapi juga sebagai ruang yang mengalami sakralisasi kultural, tempat keterikatan moral tetap dipertahankan di tengah upaya penghapusan kolonial. Memori tampil sebagai bentuk kesaksian etis (*ethical witnessing*), sedangkan perubahan Khaldun menjadi Dov memperlihatkan bagaimana kolonialisme menjangkau ruang paling intim dalam kehidupan manusia, terutama melalui retaknya hubungan antargenerasi. Artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa karya Kanafani, meskipun lahir dari tradisi sekuler-revolusioner, tetap memiliki relevansi bagi kajian sastra keagamaan karena dapat dibaca ulang dalam horizon etis-keagamaan pembaca Muslim kontemporer. Dalam konteks ini, perjuangan Palestina tidak hanya dipahami sebagai persoalan politik, tetapi juga sebagai pergulatan untuk mempertahankan martabat kemanusiaan (*al-karamah*) dan keberlanjutan sejarah.*

Kata kunci: *Cultural sacralization; Ethical witnessing; Palestinian literature; Religious humanities; Settler colonialism.*

INTRODUCTION

Ghassan Kanafani occupies a central position in modern Palestinian literature as a novelist, journalist, and intellectual whose works continue to shape discussions on exile, memory, and forced historical displacement. Written in the aftermath of the Nakba, his fiction repeatedly returns to questions of loss, belonging, and the fragile continuity between human beings, place, and history. Rather than treating displacement merely as a political event, Kanafani explores its consequences within the intimate sphere of everyday life, where memory, family, and emotional attachments become crucial sites through which

historical existence is preserved amid rupture.¹ Recent scholarship increasingly shows that Kanafani's narratives do not merely document dispossession, but actively reconstruct Palestinian subjectivity through memory, resistance, and historical consciousness.² This article argues that Kanafani's treatment of home, memory, and return operates through a process of cultural sacralization—the social and ethical mechanism by which particular spaces acquire inviolable moral significance beyond their material form—and examines how this process intersects with settler-colonial structures and religiously inflected horizons of reception in Muslim-majority contexts such as contemporary Indonesia.

The historical backdrop of Kanafani's fiction is inseparable from the Nakba of 1948, which marked the mass displacement of more than 700,000 Palestinians and the destruction of hundreds of villages. Recent scholarship has emphasized that the Nakba should not be understood as a singular historical event, but as an ongoing structure of dispossession sustained through settler-colonial mechanisms of territorial occupation, legal erasure, and intergenerational fragmentation.³ In this context, the loss of home

¹Bashir Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel: From 1948 to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Sumaya Alhaj Mohammad and Dania Meryan, "Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*: Tracing Memory beyond the Rubble," *Race & Class* 61, no. 3 (2020): 65–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396819885248>; Xinyu Ye and Hajimaming Pabiyah Toklubok, "The Culture Trauma Reflected In Kanafani's Novel Return To Haifa Within The Genre Of Palestinian Resistance Novels," *International Journal Of Humanities, Philosophy And Languages (Ijhpl)* 6, no. 24 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.35631/IJHPL.624001>.

²Muhammad Khuram et al., "Rethinking National Consciousness and Resistance Writings in Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa: A Diasporic Study*," *Contemporary Journal of Social Science Review* 3, no. 3 (2025): 1079–86, <https://doi.org/10.63878/cjssr.v3i3.1070>.

³Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>; Avery Kolers and Ranen Omer-Sherman, "Woman Is a Cause: Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa* as Critique of Patriarchal Nationalism," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 70, no. 1 (2024): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1215/0041462X-11098302>; Refqa Abu-Remaileh, "Country of Words: Palestinian Literature in the Digital Age of the Refugee," *Journal of*

in Palestinian literature carries meanings beyond physical displacement, becoming a symbol of interrupted continuity and contested historical existence. Kanafani's literary project emerges precisely from this historical condition, translating large-scale political violence into deeply personal and familial experiences.

Among Kanafani's most influential works is *Returning to Haifa* (*ʿĀ'id ilā Hayfā*, 1970),⁴ a novella that follows Said and Safiyya as they return to Haifa after more than two decades of exile. Their return confronts them with the prolonged consequences of displacement: the house they left behind is now occupied by another family, while their lost son, Khaldun, has grown up as Dov within Israeli society. Rather than presenting return as restoration, Kanafani frames it as a confrontation with unresolved historical rupture, exposing how exile continues to shape relationships between home, family, memory, and belonging long after physical separation has occurred.⁵

The novella occupies a distinctive place not only within Palestinian literary history but also within broader global discourses of displacement literature. Recent comparative studies have shown that *Returning to Haifa* resonates with other postcolonial narratives of exile by foregrounding the ethical burden of return, the instability of inherited identities, and the unresolved tension between memory and political reality.⁶ This makes the text particularly significant for interdisciplinary inquiry, where literary representation intersects with memory studies, colonial studies, and ethical criticism.

In contemporary Muslim societies, including Indonesia and the broader Nusantara region, the reception of Palestinian

Arabic Literature 52, nos. 1–2 (2021): 68–96, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1570064x-12341420>.

⁴Ghassān Kanafānī et al., *Palestine's Children: Returning to Haifa and Other Stories*, A Three Continents Book (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000); Ghassān Kanafānī, *Ā'id Ilā Hayfā* (Dār al-Ādāb, 1970).

⁵Mohammad and Meryan, "Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*"; Rasha Saeed Abdullah Badurais, "When Man Is a Cause: The Undecidability of Belonging in Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*," *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research* 04, no. 11 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.47191/ijsshr/v4-i11-38>.

⁶Ye and Toklubok, "The Culture Trauma Reflected In Kanafani's Novel *Return To Haifa* Within The Genre Of Palestinian Resistance Novels."

literature rarely operates within a purely secular geopolitical horizon. Through Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory, particularly the notion of the *horizon of expectations*, literary meaning emerges through the encounter between text and readers' historical-cultural consciousness.⁷ In the Indonesian Muslim context, narratives of forced expulsion from one's homeland, dispossession, and the struggle to defend dignity strongly resonate with ethical-religious imaginaries shaped by transnational solidarity with Palestine. Studies on Indonesian Muslim activism show that Palestine functions not only as a political cause but also as a moral-religious symbol of collective suffering, justice, and resistance against colonial domination.⁸

This receptional framework is significant because it reveals how literary texts acquire meanings that exceed their original ideological formation. Although *Returning to Haifa* was written within a secular-revolutionary context, its circulation among Muslim readers in Indonesia and Nusantara situates it within a religiously inflected moral horizon. In this context, the novella acquires religious resonance not because it explicitly contains theological doctrine, but because it mediates ethical reflection on loss, displacement, justice, and human dignity—concerns that are deeply embedded in religious-cultural consciousness.

Existing studies on *Returning to Haifa* may generally be grouped into three major clusters. First, anti-colonial and resistance-oriented studies emphasize revolutionary nationalism and ideological struggle.⁹ Second, settler-colonial and decolonial studies examine spatial dispossession and structural

⁷Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics (Theory and History of Literature)* (University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

⁸Zena Agha et al., "Gaza: A Decolonial Geography," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 49, no. 2 (2024): e12675, <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12675>; Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Between Justice and Pragmatism: Operationalizing Islamic Ethics in Indonesia's Foreign Policy on Palestine," *Studia Islamika* 33, no. 1 (2026): 143–73, <https://doi.org/10.36712/sdi.v33i1.46677>.

⁹Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel*; Khuram Et Al., "Rethinking National Consciousness And Resistance Writings IN GHASSAN Kanafani's *Returning To Haifa*."

intergenerational erasure.¹⁰ Third, memory studies focus on trauma, psychological exile, and layered reproductions of belonging.¹¹ While these approaches have significantly enriched understandings of Palestinian experience, they largely remain centered on political trauma, resistance, and identity fragmentation.

Despite these contributions, the ethical and quasi-sacral dimensions of home, memory and return, the processes through which domestic space acquires inviolable moral significance and memory operates as active witnessing rather than passive archive—have not been systematically examined. Addressing this gap requires moving beyond political trauma and identity fragmentation to consider how Kanafani's narrative constructs morally charged attachments that exceed their material and territorial forms.

This article addresses that gap by proposing a reading of *Returning to Haifa* through the concept of *cultural sacralization*. Here, “the sacred” does not refer to ritual or doctrinal sanctity, but to the social and ethical process through which certain spaces acquire inviolable historical and moral significance.¹² Within this framework, home is approached not merely as domestic property or territorial possession, but as a site of historical continuity, moral attachment, and existential orientation.

This perspective becomes particularly relevant when situated within *religious humanities*, where the sacred may emerge through ethical attachments rather than explicit theological symbolism. As Talal Asad argues, ethical life is formed through vulnerability, suffering, and moral responsibility that exceed institutional religion. In this sense, *Returning to Haifa* opens a space to investigate how home, memory, and return can be understood as ethical formations through which historical continuity and human dignity are negotiated under colonial

¹⁰ Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native”; Kolers and Omer-Sherman, “Woman Is a Cause.”

¹¹ Mohammad and Meryan, “Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*.”

¹² Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford University Press, 2001); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1959).

rupture.¹³

Drawing on settler colonial studies and religious humanities, and employing cultural sacralization as a central analytical concept, this article examines how *Returning to Haifa* articulates home, memory, and return as forms of *ethical witnessing* against colonial erasure. By doing so, it expands previous scholarship that has primarily emphasized nationalism, resistance, trauma, and colonial violence, while foregrounding the ethical and quasi-sacral significance of attachment, historical continuity, and human dignity.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design based on interpretive textual analysis to examine how Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa* (*ʿA'id ilā Hayfā*, 1970) constructs the relationship between home, memory, and return within the historical structure of Palestinian displacement. Interpretive textual analysis is epistemologically suited to this inquiry because it attends to how literary form itself mediates historical and ethical experience, making it possible to examine not only what Kanafani's text represents but how its narrative structure, spatial description, and dialogic arrangement constitute ethical meaning.¹⁴ Rather than treating literary texts as transparent representations of reality, this approach understands them as cultural forms through which historical rupture and moral attachment are negotiated.

The analytical framework of this study integrates three interrelated conceptual lenses. First, *settler colonial studies* is used to examine the structural logic of displacement, territorial appropriation, and erasure that underlies the Nakba and continues to shape Palestinian existence.¹⁵ This perspective situates the

¹³Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003).

¹⁴John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches.*, 3rd ed. (Sage Publications, 2013).

¹⁵Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native"; Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, 2nd ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Rachel Busbridge, "Israel-Palestine and the Settler Colonial

novella within a broader colonial structure rather than reducing it to an isolated personal tragedy. Second, the study employs the concept of *cultural sacralization* to explore how domestic space may acquire moral and historical significance beyond its material form. In this sense, sacralization is treated analytically as a process through which particular spaces become invested with inviolable value in collective consciousness.¹⁶ Third, Hans Robert Jaus's reception theory is used to explain how *Returning to Haifa* acquires religious resonance in Muslim readerships, especially in Indonesia and the wider Nusantara region, through shared ethical imaginaries of loss, exile, and dignity.¹⁷

The primary source of data in this study is Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa* (*ʿĀ'id ilā Ḥayfā*, 1970). To preserve interpretive precision and linguistic nuance, the analysis adopts a bilingual comparative approach by reading both the Arabic original (Dār al-Ādāb edition) and the official English translation, *Palestine's Children: Returning to Haifa and Other Stories*, translated by Barbara Harlow and Karen E. Riley (2000). This comparison allows the study to attend to shifts in meaning across key terms related to home, return, and belonging, particularly where translation may alter the affective or conceptual force of the original text.¹⁸

Data collection was conducted through *close reading*, involving repeated and systematic engagement with the text to identify narrative fragments, spatial metaphors, silences, dialogues, and symbolic patterns related to four major analytical concerns: domestic space, memory practices, intergenerational rupture, and return as confrontation. Close reading enables the researcher to move beyond thematic repetition and attend to latent

‘Turn’: From Interpretation to Decolonization,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 35, no. 1 (2018): 91–115, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276416688544>.

¹⁶Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*; Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*; Kim Knott, *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis* (Routledge, 2015).

¹⁷Jaus, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics (Theory and History of Literature)*.

¹⁸Mona Baker, *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation* (Routledge, 2011); Jean Boase-Beier, *Stylistic Approaches to Translation* (Routledge, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315759456>.

ethical structures embedded in the narrative form.¹⁹

The analysis proceeded in three stages. The first stage involved initial thematic coding, where relevant passages were identified and grouped according to recurring motifs related to home, memory, family rupture, and return. The second stage consisted of bilingual comparative analysis, in which selected Arabic and English passages were examined to trace shifts in conceptual emphasis and semantic nuance. The final stage involved theoretical synthesis, where the textual findings were interpreted through the lenses of settler colonial studies, cultural sacralization, and reception theory in order to construct a layered understanding of how Kanafani's novella negotiates displacement, historical continuity, and ethical attachment.

To strengthen interpretive validity, the study employs repeated reading, coding consistency, and theoretical triangulation by comparing textual interpretations with relevant scholarship on Palestinian memory, literary trauma, and settler colonial displacement.²⁰ Through this procedure, bilingual comparison functions not merely as a technical supplement, but as an interpretive strategy for capturing the historical, ethical, and symbolic layers embedded in Kanafani's narrative.

FINDINGS

Home as a Space of Memory and Existential Attachment

The return of Said and Safiyya to their former house in Haifa after twenty years of exile offers neither recovery nor familiarity. Kanafani develops this scene through hesitation, silence, and careful observation, allowing its emotional weight to unfold

¹⁹Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 4th ed. (Manchester University Press, 2017); Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/L/bo21386290.html>.

²⁰Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (SAGE, 1985); Ye and Toklubok, "THE CULTURE TRAUMA REFLECTED IN KANAFANI'S NOVEL RETURN TO HAIFA WITHIN THE GENRE OF PALESTINIAN RESISTANCE NOVELS"; Thamer Ibrahim AL- Masarwah et al., "Manifestations of Silence in Ghassahn Kanafani's Returning to Haifa," *World Journal of English Language* 15, no. 4 (2025): 39, <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v15n4p39>.

gradually. The house appears not only as a destination, but as a place saturated with traces of earlier life, where the past re-emerges through objects, walls, and spatial arrangements that have remained almost unchanged.

As Said moves through Haifa, his recollection of the city is marked by striking physical precision:

كان يعرفها حجراً حجراً ومفراً ومفراً²¹

“He used to know Haifa stone by stone, intersection by intersection.”²²

Read alongside the English translation, the Arabic phrase conveys a stronger sense of familiarity rooted in lived experience. Kanafani’s use of *kāna ya ‘rifuhā* (كان يعرفها) points to recognition shaped through repetition, daily movement, and long habitation. The repeated phrase *ḥajaran ḥajaran* (“stone by stone”) reinforces this closeness by tying memory to physical detail. Said’s recollection is grounded in streets, corners, and stones, suggesting that the city remains inseparable from his personal history despite years of absence.

This familiarity continues when Said and Safiyya step inside the house. Kanafani slows the pace of the narrative and directs attention to small domestic details:

“Said followed her, Safiyya at his side, with slow, hesitant steps. They began to pick out the things around them with a certain bewilderment... A photograph of Jerusalem he remembered very clearly still hung where it had when he lived there. On the opposite wall a small Syrian carpet also remained where it had always hung.”²³

The objects are ordinary—a photograph, a carpet, pieces of furniture—yet their persistence carries particular weight for the returning couple. They remain where they once were, preserving visible traces of an earlier life. Their survival creates a strange overlap between past and present. At the same time, that overlap remains incomplete, since the house is now inhabited by Miriam, whose daily life has replaced theirs.

²¹ Kanafānī, *Āid Ilā Hayfā*, 9.

²² Kanafānī et al., *Palestine’s Children*, 152.

²³ Kanafānī et al., *Palestine’s Children*, 164.

Kanafani builds this scene through observation rather than confrontation. Said and Safiyya do not respond with immediate outbursts. Their reactions unfold through pauses, glances, and restrained movements. This quietness shifts attention toward the material surroundings, allowing the house itself to carry much of the emotional force.

For Safiyya, the familiarity of the house recalls something more specific: Khaldun, the infant son they left behind during the chaos of 1948. The same walls and objects that have remained in place now carry the memory of his absence. What appears materially unchanged becomes inseparable from personal loss. The domestic setting, once associated with family life, now confronts her with interruption.

Miriam's presence adds another layer to this encounter. Her occupation of the house brings together two different family histories within the same space. The furniture, walls, and decorations visually preserve the earlier life of Said and Safiyya, yet in everyday use they now belong to someone else. This overlap creates a difficult contrast between material persistence and social transformation.

The force of the scene lies in this contrast. The house remains recognizable, but recognition no longer guarantees belonging. The space still carries traces of former life, yet access to it does not restore what has been lost. Through domestic detail, bodily recognition, and minimal dialogue, Kanafani shows how attachment to place can endure even after the relationship between person and place has been fundamentally altered.

Memory, Loss, and the Materiality of Displacement

In *Returning to Haifa*, memory appears as something unfinished, returning through fragments, physical sensations, and involuntary recollections. Kanafani treats the past as an active presence that continues to shape how Said and Safiyya move through the city and respond to its altered surroundings. Their journey back to Haifa reopens layers of experience that had remained suspended for twenty years.

This pressure of recollection emerges early in the journey, before they even reach the house. Kanafani renders Said's internal

state through a striking physical image:

بل انهالت في داخل رأسه، كما يتساقط جدار من الحجارة ويتراكم بعضه فوق بعض²⁴

“Instead, it rained down inside his head the way a stone wall collapses, the stones piling up, one upon another.”²⁵

The image of collapsing stones gives recollection a material weight. It does not arrive in a clear sequence or with calm reflection; it falls heavily, accumulating without order. The comparison suggests that the past presses itself into the present with force. For Said, what happened in Haifa is not something he can revisit at will. It returns on its own terms.

This pressure becomes clearer as he moves through streets he once knew intimately. The city remains physically recognizable, yet his relation to it has changed. Kanafani captures this altered relation in one of Said’s direct reflections:

“The steering wheel felt heavy between his palms, which had begun to sweat more profusely than they ever had before... I know this Haifa, but it refuses to acknowledge me.”²⁶

The line highlights an imbalance between familiarity and belonging. Said’s knowledge of the city remains intact, but the city no longer confirms that bond. The phrase “it refuses to acknowledge me” shows how place can remain familiar while becoming inaccessible in another sense. Recognition continues, but it no longer moves in both directions.

Kanafani extends this condition through the recollection of departure. The journey through Haifa repeatedly draws Said back to the morning of 21 April 1948, when the family was forced to leave. Here, the past is carried through sound, movement, and fear:

“Thunder came abruptly from the east, from the heights of Mount Carmel. Mortar shells flew across the city’s center, pelting the Arab quarters. The streets of Haifa turned into chaos. Alarm swept through the city as it closed its shops and the windows of its houses...”²⁷

²⁴ Kanafānī, *Āid Ilā Hayfā*, 5.

²⁵ Kanafānī et al., *Palestine’s Children*, 149.

²⁶ Kanafānī et al., *Palestine’s Children*, 150.

²⁷ Kanafānī et al., *Palestine’s Children*, 153–55.

The memory continues with the movement of crowds toward the port:

*“People were pouring from the side streets into the main street leading down to the port—men, women and children, empty-handed or carrying a few small possessions, crying or being floated along in a paralyzed silence in the midst of the clamor and confusion.”*²⁸

These details make the experience concrete. The departure is preserved not as a distant historical fact, but as a sequence of bodily impressions: noise, urgency, heat, fear, and confusion. Through this scene, Kanafani connects personal recollection to the larger reality of forced displacement.

Safiyya's relation to the past follows a quieter pattern. Kanafani often renders her grief through pauses and silence rather than direct speech. While Said recalls and verbalizes events, Safiyya's responses emerge through her reactions to space and objects. Her silence inside the house, especially when confronted with reminders of Khaldun's absence, becomes another way of carrying what has been lost.

This uneven distribution of memory across the two characters is significant. Recollection appears in speech, silence, bodily tension, and physical surroundings. It does not remain confined to what has already happened, but continues to shape the present. The city, the house, and the remembered scenes of departure all point to the same condition: displacement extends beyond physical removal, continuing across time through the persistence of lived experience.

Khaldun/Dov and the Intergenerational Rupture of Identity

The meeting between Said, Safiyya, and Khaldun—now living as Dov—forms one of the most decisive moments in *Returning to Haifa*. Kanafani does not present the scene as a reunion between parents and a lost child. The encounter unfolds through restraint, distance, and a carefully measured exchange that immediately reveals the separation created by time and different life trajectories. Standing before Said and Safiyya is no longer the

²⁸Kanafānī et al., *Palestine's Children*, 154–55.

infant they remember, but an adult shaped within another language, another household, and another social world.

Kanafani introduces Dov in military uniform, holding his cap in his hand. His appearance alone signals the distance between the child preserved in memory and the adult now standing before them. That distance becomes unmistakable in his first response:

أنا لا أعرف أما غيرك، أما أبي فقد قتل في سيناء قبل إحدى عشرة سنة، ولا أعرف غيركما²⁹

*"I don't know any mother but you. As for my father, he was killed in the Sinai eleven years ago. I know no others than the two of you."*³⁰

Read alongside the Arabic original, the statement carries a striking emotional reserve. Dov acknowledges the existence of his biological parents, yet his words make clear that acknowledgment does not restore intimacy. His understanding of family has been shaped by the people who raised him, rather than by those who lost him. The line draws a boundary between biological origin and lived attachment.

Kanafani deepens this separation through Dov's account of his upbringing:

منذ كنت صغيراً كنت يهودياً... ذهبت إلى المدرسة اليهودية، درست العبرية³¹...

*"From the time I was small I was a Jew... I went to Jewish school, I studied Hebrew, I go to Temple, I eat kosher food..."*³²

The sequence is simple, yet revealing. School, language, religious practice, and food appear as ordinary routines, but together they show how identity is formed through repeated habits of everyday life. Kanafani presents this not as a dramatic declaration, but as a straightforward account of the environment that shaped Dov's present self.

For Said and Safiyya, this explanation makes visible the gap between memory and reality. Khaldun has remained fixed in their minds as the child left behind in 1948, while Dov stands before

²⁹Kanafānī, *Āid Ilā Hayfā*, 63.

³⁰Kanafānī et al., *Palestine's Children*, 179.

³¹Kanafānī, *Āid Ilā Hayfā*, 67.

³²Kanafānī et al., *Palestine's Children*, 181.

them as someone whose life has continued elsewhere. The person they encounter no longer corresponds to the child they carried in memory.

Kanafani keeps the conversation controlled, avoiding emotional excess. This restraint gives the scene much of its force. The separation between them is not expressed through anger or accusation, but through the clarity of Dov's words. His calm explanation makes the break more difficult to ignore.

Safiyya's silence is equally significant. While Said continues speaking and asking questions, Safiyya remains largely quiet, responding only in brief moments. Her silence marks another form of recognition—one that does not search for explanation, but absorbs the reality of loss as it unfolds before her.

The encounter offers no reconciliation. What it discloses is the extent to which time, upbringing, and different social environments have irreparably reshaped the bond between parent and child. Khaldun remains part of the past carried by Said and Safiyya, while Dov belongs to a present formed by another history. Kanafani leaves this distance unresolved, allowing the scene to stand as one of the clearest expressions of generational rupture in the novella.

Return as Confrontation and the Reorientation of Responsibility

In the closing part of *Returning to Haifa*, the meaning of return undergoes an important change. Earlier in the novella, the journey back to Haifa is closely connected to the possibility of recovering home, family, and the life interrupted in 1948. By the end of the narrative, that expectation has shifted. Returning to the city brings Said and Safiyya face to face with the limits of what can be reclaimed.

This recognition emerges in Said's reflections after leaving the house. The objects that once seemed inseparable from the idea of homeland now appear uncertain as markers of belonging. Kanafani renders this uncertainty through a sequence of questions:

“What is a homeland? Is it these two chairs that remained in this room for twenty years? The table? Peacock feathers? The picture of Jerusalem on the wall? The copper lock? The oak tree?”

The balcony? What is a homeland?”³³

The repeated listing of ordinary domestic objects is significant. Each item preserves traces of earlier life, yet Said’s questioning suggests that their survival can no longer sustain the meaning of homeland on its own. The house remains physically present, but its material persistence cannot restore what has been interrupted.

Earlier in the novella, home is closely tied to family, place, and recollection. At this point, those elements begin to separate. The objects remain where they once were, but their ability to anchor identity has weakened. Kanafani allows this realization to unfold through questioning rather than direct explanation, giving the scene a reflective quality.

A new direction enters the narrative when Safiyya mentions their other son, Khaldun:

إنه يحمل السلاح الآن³⁴
“Now he’s carrying arms.”³⁵

The sentence is brief, yet it redirects Said’s attention. Until this moment, his thoughts have remained centered on what was left behind—the house, Khaldun, and the life interrupted in Haifa. The mention of Khalid introduces another temporal orientation, drawing attention away from the past toward what remains unresolved.

This redirection becomes clearer in Said’s final reflection:

*“I’m looking for the true Palestine, the Palestine that’s more than memories, more than peacock feathers, more than a son, more than scars written by bullets on the stairs... For Khalid, the homeland is the future.”*³⁶

The repeated phrase “more than” gradually broadens the meaning of homeland. What had earlier been attached to house, family, and memory now extends beyond them. The sequence moves from concrete objects toward wider human experiences—loss, violence, and the possibility of what lies ahead.

³³Kanafānī et al., *Palestine’s Children*, 186.

³⁴Kanafānī, *Aid Ilā Hayfā*, 60.

³⁵Kanafānī et al., *Palestine’s Children*, 178.

³⁶Kanafānī et al., *Palestine’s Children*, 187–88.

Kanafani leaves this process unresolved. Said does not recover the past, nor does he fully define what homeland now means. What changes is his relation to it. Return no longer centers on restoration, but on a revised understanding of what has been lost and what remains unfinished.

The final pages retain the emotional weight of this realization. Said and Safiyya leave Haifa without closure or reconciliation. The city remains behind them, materially intact but no longer recoverable in its earlier meaning. Through this ending, Kanafani presents return as a moment in which loss, memory, and responsibility are carried into an uncertain future.

DISCUSSION

Memory, Objects, and Home under Settler-Colonial Displacement

In *Returning to Haifa*, the house is more than a domestic setting or a lost piece of property. Its significance develops through the way rooms, furniture, and ordinary objects continue to preserve traces of an interrupted life. When Said and Safiyya return, they encounter a house that remains physically intact, but the world that once gave it meaning has changed. Much of the tension in the novella lies in this coexistence between material persistence and altered belonging.

This condition can be read more clearly through recent discussions of settler colonialism. Contemporary scholarship increasingly describes settler colonialism as an enduring structure sustained not only through moments of expulsion, but through ordinary routines, domestic occupation, and everyday normalization.³⁷ Kanafani's novella reflects this condition at an intimate scale. The violence of dispossession does not end with exile; it continues in the ordinary fact that another family now

³⁷Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native"; Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, "Memory for Forgetfulness: Conceptualizing a Memory Practice of Settler Colonial Disavowal," *Theory and Society* 52, no. 2 (2023): 263–92, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-022-09486-0>; Marcelo Svirsky, "The Reproduction of Settler Colonialism in Palestine," *Journal of Perpetrator Research* 4, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.21039/jpr.4.1.79>.

inhabits a space still marked by the lives of those who were forced to leave.

The survival of domestic objects intensifies this condition. What the close reading in the Findings section established at the level of narrative texture can now be interpreted theoretically: the objects persist materially while the social relationships that gave them meaning have been severed, producing what might be termed a condition of inhabited absence. The house is simultaneously recognizable and inaccessible—a spatial paradox that settler-colonial dispossession uniquely generates.

Recent studies of Palestinian exile have shown that home often becomes a place where presence and absence remain closely intertwined. Even when physical access is broken, the idea of home continues to organize memory, identity, and moral orientation³⁸ Kanafani's Haifa reflects this pattern. It continues to shape Said and Safiyya's understanding of themselves, even though their relationship to it has been severed.

This perspective also aligns with a broader understanding of home under conditions of displacement. Home is not merely a shelter, but a space where memory, vulnerability, and social continuity are constantly negotiated. Kanafani complicates this further by showing what happens when the structure of home remains, but the life once sustained within it has been replaced. What confronts Said and Safiyya is therefore not simply the loss of property, but the reordering of domestic life itself.

At this point, the concept of cultural sacralization proves analytically indispensable. Here, "sacred" does not refer to ritual holiness or theological sanctity. Rather, it points to the way certain spaces acquire moral and collective significance beyond their practical or economic function. Durkheim's distinction between the sacred and the profane explains how spaces and objects become set apart through their relation to collective life—yet his framework, grounded in ritual practice, requires adjustment when applied to literary representation. In Kanafani's novella,

³⁸ Alexander Hartwiger, "The Presence of Absence: The House in Palestinian Exilic Writing," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 54, no. 2 (2023): 111–37; Leonardo Schiocchet, "Home in Exile Palestinianness as Moral Subjunctive Destination," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 14, no. 1 (2024): 104–19, <https://doi.org/10.1086/729840>.

sacralization is not enacted through communal ritual but through narrative form: the house acquires its inviolable character through the accumulated weight of description, recollection, and dialogue.³⁹ Eliade's reflections on sacred space similarly suggest that human communities often organize identity and orientation around places that carry existential significance.⁴⁰

This reading helps clarify why the house in Kanafani's novella exceeds symbolic or nostalgic value. Descriptions such as "symbolic" or "affective" explain part of its function, but they do not fully account for why the house continues to organize the protagonists' understanding of history, family, and belonging. The house matters because it gathers together accumulated life, interrupted relationships, and the visible remains of what has been broken.

This pattern is not limited to Said and Safiyya's return to Haifa. Kanafani develops a related configuration elsewhere in the novella through the episode of Faris al-Lubda, where memory attaches not to the house as a whole, but to a single preserved object. The portrait of Badr al-Lubda in Jaffa functions differently from the furniture in Haifa. While the domestic objects in Haifa sharpen estrangement, the portrait becomes a shared point of recognition for another displaced Palestinian family. Its preservation depends less on legal ownership than on its ability to sustain connection across separation.

Seen in this light, recent work on colonial erasure has shown that dispossession often operates not only through territorial removal, but through the disruption of the material traces by which communities remember themselves.⁴¹ Kanafani's use of domestic objects speaks directly to this condition. Furniture, photographs, and portraits may appear minor, yet they carry the weight of historical presence.

³⁹ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

⁴⁰ Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*.

⁴¹M. Nasooha, "'A History Buried Alive': Resisting Amnesia and Reclaiming Native Palestinian Ecology in the Works of Susan Abulhawa," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 46 (May 2024): 100–118, <https://doi.org/10.13169/arabstudquar.46.2.0100>; Sabbagh-Khoury, "Memory for Forgetfulness: Conceptualizing a Memory Practice of Settler Colonial Disavowal."

From the perspective of religious humanities, this treatment of home and objects becomes especially significant. Recent studies of sacred space increasingly suggest that sacredness may emerge through collective attachment, embodied practice, and historical memory rather than through formal ritual designation alone.⁴² Kanafani's domestic spaces can be understood in this way. They are not explicitly holy, yet they carry a density of moral significance shaped by family, remembrance, and loss.

This helps explain the continuing relevance of *Returning to Haifa* for religious literary studies. Although the novella emerges from a secular-revolutionary context, its representation of home as a morally charged space allows it to resonate within religiously inflected readings, particularly in contexts where Palestine is received through concerns of justice and human dignity. Studies on Indonesian Muslim solidarity with Palestine show that the loss of home and homeland is often interpreted within a moral horizon shaped by dignity, justice, and collective responsibility.⁴³

Viewed from this perspective, the house in *Returning to Haifa* functions as more than a private dwelling or a national allegory. Its significance lies in the overlap between material survival and historical rupture. Rooms and objects remain, yet the life they once sustained has been displaced. Kanafani's narrative shows how violence extends beyond territory into the spaces through which human beings remember, belong, and locate themselves in history.

Memory as Ethical Witnessing and the Persistence of Historical Trauma

Memory in *Returning to Haifa* does not appear as a completed recollection of the past. Kanafani presents it as unfinished, returning through fragments, bodily sensations, and

⁴²Knott, *The Location of Religion*; Clayton Goodgame, "The Convent Camp: Sacred Places in Palestinian Refugee History," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, October 6, 2023, fead070, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fead070>.

⁴³ Muhammad Shadiqi et al., "Support for Palestine Among Indonesian Muslims: Religious Identity and Solidarity as Reasons for E-Petition Signing," *Psychological Research on Urban Society* 3, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.7454/proust.v3i1.83>; Akbarzadeh, "Between Justice and Pragmatism."

recurring scenes of separation. For Said and Safiyya, the past remains active in the present, shaping how they move through Haifa and how they confront its altered reality. What emerges in the novella is not memory as archive, but memory as lived persistence.

Recent studies of Palestinian literature have drawn attention to this unstable quality of memory under exile. Rather than preserving history in a fixed form, memory often remains active as a structure through which historical continuity is carried across displacement and loss.⁴⁴ Kanafani's novella follows this pattern closely. The recurring images of collapsing stones, interrupted departure, and the absence of Khaldun show how recollection remains inseparable from present experience.

The close reading above establishes the texture of this persistence; what requires theoretical elaboration is its moral function. Ethical witnessing, as Gil and Hofer have argued, names the practice by which fragmented testimony preserves the moral weight of suffering without reconstructing a complete historical sequence.⁴⁵ Rather than reconstructing events in a complete historical sequence, such remembering sustains the force of past experience in the present. In *Returning to Haifa*, Said and Safiyya's recollections work in this way. Their memories do not simply retell what happened in 1948; they carry its consequences into their present life.

This becomes especially important when placed in relation to the Nakba. Recent scholarship increasingly describes the Nakba as an ongoing condition rather than a finished historical event, since its effects continue through exile, fragmented families, and interrupted forms of inheritance.⁴⁶ Kanafani's narrative reflects this condition by refusing to isolate 1948 as a closed chapter. The

⁴⁴ Mohammad and Meryan, "Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*"; Ye and Toklubok, "The Culture Trauma Reflected In Kanafani's Novel Return To Haifa Within The Genre Of Palestinian Resistance Novels."

⁴⁵ Idit Gil and Stefanie Hofer, "Wounded Scholar—Healing Witness," *Life Writing* 21, no. 4 (2024): 631–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2024.2427479>.

⁴⁶ Nur Masalha, *Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); Sabbagh-Khoury, "Memory for Forgetfulness: Conceptualizing a Memory Practice of Settler Colonial Disavowal."

past repeatedly interrupts the present, suggesting that displacement continues to shape ordinary life long after the moment of departure.

This persistence also intersects with recent work in religious humanities, particularly in discussions of suffering and moral formation. Recent studies of affect and religion have shown that suffering often becomes one of the central sites through which collective moral consciousness is shaped and sustained.⁴⁷ In this perspective, memory is not simply retrospective. It functions as an ethical process through which communities preserve the significance of what has been endured.

Safiyya's silence is particularly important in this regard. Unlike Said, whose recollections often appear in direct narration, Safiyya's relation to the past is more often expressed through pauses, bodily responses, and restrained speech. Recent scholarship has drawn attention to silence as a constitutive narrative element in *Returning to Haifa*. Al-Masarwah, Al-Thunebat, and Almazaidah argue that silence in Kanafani's novella is not merely the absence of speech, but a discursive mode through which meaning is generated and emotional tension sustained.⁴⁸ This is especially visible in Safiyya's restrained presence, where silence becomes one of the primary ways trauma is carried and communicated. Her silence inside the house and in front of Dov preserves the continuity of grief without translating it fully into words.

The novella also links private memory to collective loss. Said and Safiyya remember their house and their son, but these memories remain inseparable from the wider displacement of Palestinians in 1948. Recent studies on collective trauma have noted that intimate memories often become one of the primary means through which larger historical experiences are transmitted and sustained across generations.⁴⁹ Kanafani repeatedly draws

⁴⁷ Jenna Supp-Montgomerie, "Affect and the Study of Religion," *Religion Compass* 9, no. 10 (2015): 335–45, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12166>.

⁴⁸ Masarwah et al., "Manifestations of Silence in Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*."

⁴⁹ Mikko Joronen, "Spaces of Waiting : Politics of Precarious Recognition in the Occupied West Bank," *Environment And Planning D: Society And Space* 35, no. 6 (2017): 994–1011, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775817708789>; Nasooha, "A History Buried Alive."

these two levels together, allowing personal loss to remain tied to collective history.

This connection is especially relevant from the perspective of religious studies. Across many traditions, remembrance functions not only as a cognitive act, but as an ethical practice that sustains communal identity and moral obligation. Recent comparative studies in religion and memory have emphasized that remembering often serves to preserve justice claims and resist forms of moral forgetting.⁵⁰ Although *Returning to Haifa* does not frame memory through ritual or doctrine, its insistence on remembrance reflects this broader moral function.

This helps explain why Kanafani's novella continues to resonate in religiously inflected contexts, including Indonesia. Studies on Muslim solidarity with Palestine suggest that Palestinian suffering is often received not merely as political information, but as an ethical demand to remember and bear witness to injustice. In this context, Kanafani's literary treatment of memory extends beyond its secular origins and becomes part of a wider moral horizon.

From this perspective, memory in *Returning to Haifa* exceeds nostalgia or historical preservation. It operates as a mode of carrying unfinished history. Through recurring fragments, bodily pressure, silence, and repeated recollection, Kanafani shows that displacement does not end when people leave a place. It continues in the work of memory itself, where the past remains active and insists on recognition.

Family, Genealogy, and the Rupture of Intergenerational Continuity

The encounter between Said, Safiyya, and Dov brings into view one of the most far-reaching consequences of displacement in *Returning to Haifa*: the interruption of familial continuity across generations. Earlier in the novella, loss is largely organized around house, memory, and physical absence. The meeting with Dov shifts that loss into human form. What was once tied to place

⁵⁰Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Goodgame, "The Convent Camp."

and objects now appears in the transformed life of the child who had been left behind.

Recent scholarship on Palestinian literature has increasingly emphasized that the Nakba should be understood not only as territorial dispossession, but also as the disruption of kinship structures and generational transmission.⁵¹ Kanafani's portrayal of Dov reflects this condition with particular clarity. Khaldun survives in the memory of Said and Safiyya as an infant fixed at the moment of separation, while Dov appears as an adult formed by another language, another education, and another social environment. The continuity imagined by his biological parents has been replaced by the continuity of another life.

This distinction between biological relation and lived formation is central to the scene. Dov's acknowledgment of his biological parents makes clear that kinship in the novella cannot be sustained by blood alone. His life has been shaped by another language, another family structure, and another historical environment, all of which redefine the meaning of belonging. Kanafani's narrative reflects this process directly. Dov recognizes his origins, but the relationships that shaped his life were formed elsewhere.

His description of his upbringing makes this even clearer. School, language, religious practice, and food appear in the novella as ordinary routines, yet together they reveal how identity takes shape through repeated habits of everyday life. Recent work in memory and identity studies has shown that socialization remains one of the principal ways through which historical belonging is transmitted across generations.⁵² Dov's life follows this pattern. The habits that structure his present are no longer connected to the world imagined by Said and Safiyya.

This rupture becomes especially significant when viewed through religious humanities. Across many religious traditions,

⁵¹Anaheed Al-Hardan, *Palestinians in Syria*, Nakba Memories of Shattered Communities (Columbia University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.7312/al-h17636>; Sabbagh-Khoury, "Memory for Forgetfulness: Conceptualizing a Memory Practice of Settler Colonial Disavowal"; Nasooha, "A History Buried Alive."

⁵²Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (Columbia University Press, 2012); Joronen, "Spaces of Waiting."

family functions not only as a biological unit, but as a primary site of ethical transmission, where values, practices, and shared memory are carried from one generation to another. Recent comparative studies in religion and kinship have shown that the family often serves as one of the most enduring structures through which moral life is sustained.⁵³ Kanafani's novella becomes relevant here because it shows what happens when that chain of transmission is interrupted.

What is lost in the separation from Khaldun is therefore not only a child, but the possibility of passing on a shared world. The loss extends into language, everyday habits, and inherited forms of remembrance. Said and Safiyya confront not simply the fact of separation, but the realization that the life they once imagined continuing through their son has unfolded elsewhere.

Safiyya's silence intensifies this recognition. While Said continues speaking and asking questions, Safiyya remains largely silent, absorbing the reality before her. Recent studies on trauma and maternal memory have shown that silence often becomes one of the ways loss is carried when language proves insufficient (Ahmed 2023; Hirsch 2019). Her silence in this scene does not mark absence. It reflects another form of recognition—one grounded in the immediate encounter with what can no longer be recovered.

This scene also helps explain why *Returning to Haifa* continues to resonate in religiously inflected readings, particularly in Muslim-majority contexts. In many contemporary receptions of Palestine, the destruction of family continuity is often understood not only as political violence, but as an assault on the moral fabric of communal life.⁵⁴ Kanafani's novella does not name this in theological terms, yet it provides a literary form through which such concerns become visible.

From this perspective, the meeting between Said, Safiyya, and Dov is more than a family encounter. It becomes a concentrated expression of how displacement reshapes genealogy, interrupts transmission, and alters the inheritance of identity

⁵³Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context* (Wadsworth Thomson Learning, 2002); Goodgame, "The Convent Camp."

⁵⁴Akbarzadeh, "Between Justice and Pragmatism."

across generations. Kanafani leaves the separation unresolved, suggesting that some forms of loss cannot be repaired by return alone. The family remains connected by origin, yet divided by history.

Return, Homeland, and the Reorientation of Historical Responsibility

The final movement of *Returning to Haifa* changes the meaning of return in a fundamental way. At the beginning of the novella, return appears closely tied to the possibility of recovering what had been left behind: home, family, and the life interrupted in 1948. By the end, however, that expectation has been altered. Said's return to Haifa does not restore continuity with the past; it exposes the limits of what physical return can recover.

This change becomes visible in Said's questioning of the material signs of homeland. His repeated reflection on chairs, walls, locks, and other domestic objects suggests that these remnants can no longer sustain the full meaning of belonging. The objects remain, and with them the visible traces of earlier life, yet they no longer provide access to the world that once existed within them. The house survives, but its survival does not reverse the separation that has shaped the lives of its former inhabitants.

Recent studies of Palestinian return narratives have noted that return often functions less as recovery than as confrontation. Rather than restoring a stable point of origin, return frequently exposes the transformations produced by exile, occupation, and historical distance.⁵⁵ Kanafani's novella follows this pattern closely. Haifa remains physically recognizable, but the social world attached to it has shifted. The city is still there, but the relationships that once gave it meaning can no longer be re-entered in the same way.

The mention of Khalid marks an important turn in this process. Safiyya's brief remark that Khalid is now carrying arms redirects Said's attention away from what has been lost toward what remains unresolved. Until this moment, his reflections are

⁵⁵Michael Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature: Sites of Reading in Colonial Egypt* (Princeton University Press, 2016); Hartwiger, "The Presence of Absence"; Schiocchet, "Home in Exile Palestinianness as Moral Subjective Destination."

largely shaped by memory, house, and the figure of Khaldun. Khalid introduces another orientation—one directed not toward recovery, but toward continuation.

This distinction is significant. Khaldun represents the interrupted line of the past, while Khalid represents a future still open to action. Through this contrast, Kanafani reorganizes the meaning of homeland. It no longer resides only in preserved objects, remembered rooms, or inherited attachment. It begins to take shape as something unfinished, something carried forward rather than recovered.

Recent Palestinian literary criticism has increasingly noted this movement in Kanafani's writing. His later works often shift from the language of mourning toward forms of political and ethical futurity, where loss remains central but does not close the horizon of action.⁵⁶ *Returning to Haifa* reflects this development clearly. The novella does not abandon grief, but it repositions grief within a broader sense of historical responsibility.

This dimension is especially significant in relation to religious humanities. Recent studies in religion and ethics have emphasized that memory of suffering often functions as the ground for future-oriented moral responsibility. Communities preserve the past not only to remember what happened, but to carry forward its unresolved demands.⁵⁷ In this perspective, remembrance remains active because it shapes ethical obligation toward what has yet to be addressed.

This framework helps explain the wider resonance of *Returning to Haifa* in religiously inflected contexts, including Indonesia. Recent studies on Muslim solidarity with Palestine show that Palestinian suffering is often received not simply as a historical tragedy, but as an ongoing ethical concern that calls for solidarity and collective moral responsibility.⁵⁸ Said's movement from attachment to the lost house toward a broader sense of

⁵⁶Abu-Manneh, *The Palestinian Novel*; Khuram Et Al., "Rethinking National Consciousness And Resistance Writings In Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning To Haifa*."

⁵⁷Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*.

⁵⁸Shadiqi et al., "Support for Palestine Among Indonesian Muslims."

unfinished responsibility aligns closely with this receptional horizon.

Kanafani leaves the ending deliberately open. There is no restored family, no recovered house, and no full reconciliation. What remains is a changed understanding of homeland itself. It is no longer limited to what can be revisited or possessed. Instead, it becomes a horizon shaped by memory, loss, and the responsibilities that emerge from them. Through this ending, *Returning to Haifa* presents return not as the end of exile, but as a moment in which the meaning of belonging is redirected toward an unfinished future.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa* presents home, memory, and return as complex practices of ethical witnessing that resist the historical erasure embedded in settler-colonial structures. Through the experiences of Said and Safiyya, alongside the parallel narrative of Faris al-Lubda, exile appears not merely as physical displacement, but as an ongoing condition that restructures human relationships, domestic material culture, and family genealogy.

The physical house in Haifa functions not as a passive backdrop or a simple political symbol, but as a site of cultural sacralization where enduring moral attachments and claims to dignity (*al-karamah*) are sustained against colonial amnesia. The intergenerational rupture embodied by Khaldun/Dov further reveals the intimate reach of colonial power into human subjectivity, showing that identity under displacement is shaped by space, language, and socialization as much as by biological ties.

The principal contribution of this article lies in its integrated reading of Kanafani's secular narrative through the combined frameworks of settler-colonial studies, religious humanities, and reception theory. Moving beyond nationalist or trauma-centered approaches, this study reorients attention toward the moral and quasi-sacral attachments that displaced subjects maintain with fractured worlds. It demonstrates how a secular-revolutionary text may become religiously legible within specific communities of reading, such as contemporary Muslim readerships in Indonesia, through shared ethical imaginaries of justice, suffering, and

human dignity. This article therefore contributes to ongoing discussions at the intersection of Kanafani studies and religious literary studies by showing that the preservation of historical presence under colonial modernity may be understood as an ethically charged and culturally sacralized endeavor.

Beyond its contribution to Kanafani studies, this article models a methodology for reading secular anti-colonial fiction as religiously legible within specific reception communities. The integrated framework of settler-colonial studies, cultural sacralization, and reception theory offers a transferable approach for examining how texts written within one ideological formation acquire moral and spiritual resonance within another—a problem of increasing relevance as Palestinian literature circulates across globally diverse Muslim readerships.

At the same time, this study remains limited by its methodological scope. Since it relies primarily on interpretive close reading of a single novella, it does not address empirical reception histories, historical archives, or ethnographic accounts of readers' responses. In addition, the religious humanities perspective employed here remains focused on ethical and cultural sacralization, leaving broader comparative theological and interreligious dimensions open for further exploration.

Future research may extend this inquiry by undertaking comparative studies across Kanafani's wider body of fiction or contemporary Palestinian literature. Further work may also deepen engagement with religious humanities through empirical reception studies or comparative theological frameworks, examining how spatial memory and colonial displacement continue to be negotiated within broader Muslim reading communities.

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