



Beyond power and politics: precarity and the human cost of conflict in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* and Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*

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Abstract

Individuals and communities still struggle with the enduring impact of war, colonization, and occupation. This paper reconceptualizes the human cost of these adversities through a comparative reading of Arabic and Western literary representations. It explores Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955) and Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* (1962), with the former illustrating the effects of the Vietnam War and the latter depicting the aftermath of the Nakba. Despite portraying distinct geopolitical struggles, both texts share a deep concern with the psychological, cultural, and social toll of colonization. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's and Edward Said's postcolonial theories, this study argues that colonization and occupation are not only power struggles but are also deeply emotional and dehumanizing experiences that fracture identity. Extending the analysis into the present, the paper engages Judith Butler's theory of precarity, arguing that the persistent conditions of imperial intervention and occupation have recently evolved into a precarious system that renders colonized and displaced populations politically and existentially neglected. Eventually, this study contributes to ongoing debates on postcolonialism and critical human rights, highlighting how literary narratives capture the persistent structures of global precarity.

Keywords: Conflict, Identity, Colonialism, Vietnam, Occupation, Palestine, Postcolonial theory, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Theory of Precarity.

ما وراء نطاق الهيمنة والسياسة: الهشاشة والتكلفة الإنسانية للصراع في روايتي الأمريكي الهادي
لجراهام جرين ورجال في الشمس لغسان كنفاني

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أستاذ مشارك، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها والترجمة الفورية، كلية الدراسات الإنسانية، فرع البنات، جامعة الأزهر، القاهرة، مصر

ملخص

لا تزال الأفراد والمجتمعات تعاني من الآثار المستمرة للحروب والاستعمار والاحتلال. تسعى هذه الورقة البحثية إلقاء الضوء على التكلفة الإنسانية لهذه الأزمات من خلال قراءة مقارنة للتصوير الأدبي لتلك التكلفة في السياقين الغربي والعربي. تتناول الدراسة رواية/الأمريكي/اليهودي لجراهام جرين (1955)، التي تصوّر آثار حرب فيتنام، ورواية رجال في الشمس لغسان كنفاني (1962)، التي تسلط الضوء على تداعيات نكبة 1948. وعلى الرغم من اختلاف السياقات الجيوسياسية في العملين، فإن كليهما يشتركان في إبراز الأثر النفسي والثقافي والاجتماعي العميق للاستعمار. بالاستناد إلى نظريات ما بعد الكولونيالية لكل من فرانز فانون وإدوارد سعيد، يسعى البحث إلى إثبات فكرة أن الاستعمار والاحتلال لا يمثلان مجرد صراعات على السلطة، بل هما أيضًا تجارب إنسانية مؤلمة تؤدي إلى تمزق الهوية الفردية والجمعية. كما توسّع الدراسة تحليلها ليشمل الوقت الحاضر من خلال توظيف نظرية الهشاشة لجوديث بتلر، لتؤكد أن الاستعمار وتبعاته تطوّرت إلى منظومة معاصرة من الهشاشة السياسية والوجودية، تجعل من الشعوب المستعمرة والمهجّرة كيانات مهمّشة وغير مرئية سياسيًا. تُقدّم هذه الدراسة إسهامًا ببناءً في الجدال الراهن حول ما بعد الكولونيالية وحقوق الإنسان، موضحةً كيف تعكس الأعمال الأدبية استمرارية الهشاشة على المستوى العالمي.

كلمات مفتاحية: الصراع، الهوية، الاستعمار، فيتنام، الاحتلال، فلسطين، نظرية ما بعد الكولونيالية، فرانز فانون، إدوارد سعيد، نظرية الهشاشة.

Introduction

The large-scale demonstrations that erupted across the United States in response to Israel's war on Gaza after the events of October 7, 2023, bear striking historical resemblance to the antiwar protests that swept America during the Vietnam War. Though these conflicts are distinct in their geopolitical and historical contexts, the global outrage and the human cost of these disputes suggest an underlying resemblance in the conditions of oppression imposed by colonization and occupation. Notably, Edward Said had early on recognized a resemblance between the Vietnamese and Palestinian struggles, anticipating the parallels between the two even before protests erupted in the United States against its involvement in both conflicts. In *The Question of Palestine* (1979), he draws a comparison between the Palestinian struggle and the Vietnamese resistance, highlighting their similarities from a political perspective as parallel cases of anticolonial resistance against foreign domination (163). Said's analogy still inspires further examination of the parallels between the two issues from a humanistic perspective.

This paper explores the connectedness between the Vietnamese and Palestinian struggles in the field of literature. It extends the discussion by analyzing and comparing two novels that capture their respective realities, Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955) and Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* (1962). While Greene's novel critiques the Western interventionist mindset in Vietnam, Kanafani's novel lays bare the existential limbo of Palestinian statelessness and exile. To frame this comparative study, the paper employs Frantz Fanon's anticolonial theories, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), to analyze *The Quiet American*.

Meanwhile, Edward Said's postcolonial exile critique, *The Question of Palestine* (1979) and *Reflections on Exile* (2000), provides the foundation for reading *Men in the Sun*. The two novels are depicted as an exploration of how colonization and occupation extend beyond physical domination to create existential, psychological, and cultural crises that shape the lives of the oppressed.

Nevertheless, while Fanon's and Said's theories provide essential perspectives on the processes of colonial and occupational dehumanization of the colonized and displaced populations, they cannot account for the persistence of these crises as evident in the endings of the two novels, where the Vietnamese protagonist, Phoung, remains trapped in a perpetual state of unrecognized suffering and the three Palestinian refugees in Kanafani's novel die a politically meaningless death. To bridge this gap, this study integrates Judith Butler's theory of precarity, which extends postcolonial analysis beyond historical oppression to examine how colonial and imperial systems sustain ongoing conditions of precarity and neglect where the colonized and occupied exist in a perpetual state of vulnerability. In her book *Precarious Life*, Butler argues that precarity is a politically enforced condition where "certain lives" are "highly protected", valued, and mourned, while "other lives" are not even qualified as "grievable" (32).

Reading the Vietnamese and Palestinian experiences through Butler's framework of precarity establishes a crucial theoretical link between Fanon's and Said's perspectives. Butler's theory offers an additional layer of analysis, demonstrating that colonialism and occupation produce conditions of precarity that render certain lives vulnerable, invisible, and ungrievable. By incorporating Butler's hypothesis, this study emphasizes the enduring human dimension of colonial and imperial violence, one that extends beyond historical injustices to shape contemporary realities of conflict and vulnerability.

Literature review

Studies on Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* and Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* have analyzed these novels through various lenses, including identity crisis, psychological fragmentation, geopolitical critique, and economic dimensions of conflict. Stephen J. Whitfield's article "Limited Engagement: *The Quiet American* as History" (1996) examines Graham Greene's novel as a historical reflection on American foreign policy, ideological naivety, and the consequences of interventionism in Vietnam. Paula Martín Salván, in her article "Being involved: Community and Commitment in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*" (2013), discusses the theme of commitment in *The Quiet American*, analyzing how individual and collective interests intersect through the triangular relationship between Fowler, Phuong, and Pyle and the broader ideological struggles in 1950s Indochina. Meanwhile, Azhar Noori Fejer's "'Resymbolization' of

a Text; a Relatively Different Perspective of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*" (2016) studies the novel as a critique of U.S. political interference in Vietnam. In "The Resonance of Conflict: Genre and Politics in the Transatlantic Reception of *The Quiet American*" (2020), Oscar Jansson examines the evolving critical reception of *The Quiet American*. His paper analyzes how biographical, historical, and political interpretations have shaped its status as a political novel, historical commentary, and ideological critique, while also explores its connections to Cold War policies, covert operations, and Greene's own involvement in the debates of his time. Finally, Noor Saady Essa's "The Role of Violence in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*" (2022) studies the theme of violence in the novel, examining how American interference in Vietnam exemplifies cultural hegemony and analyzing the impact of this dominance on Vietnamese society and daily life in the 20th century. These scholarly discussions reveal that *The Quiet American* is not merely an antiwar novel but a work that interrogates the moral ambiguities of interventionism, complicity, and ideological propaganda. While these studies provide valuable insights into identity, narrative structure, political critique, and economic themes, they do not fully account for the human cost of conflict and the persistent, systemic conditions that sustain the vulnerability of the colonized populations beyond direct military or colonial rule.

Scholarly discussions of *Men in the Sun* offer political and historical reflections on the Palestinian issue, while other studies emphasize the psychological impact and traumatic experience of displacement, or the novel's symbolism. Shadi S. Neimneh, in his article "Postcolonial Arabic Fiction Revisited: Naturalism and Existentialism in Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*" (2017), examines the existential and naturalistic dimensions of Kanafani's novel, arguing that these philosophical and sociological frameworks intensify the political relevance of postcolonialism in his fiction and reinforce the themes of alienation, dispossession, and resistance in Kanafani's work. His second article "The Symbolism of the Sun in Ghassan Kanafani's Fiction: A Political Critique" (2017) depicts the symbolism of the sun in the novel arguing that it serves as a naturalistic and political metaphor for the suffering, exile, and harsh realities faced by Palestinian refugees, challenging traditional literary associations of the sun with hope and renewal. A similar study is conducted by Omer Elmahdi analyzing the symbolism in Kanafani's novel. His paper, "The Deep Meaning of Symbolism Significance in *Men in the Sun*" (2020), focuses on how the characters and key symbols, particularly the unpounded walls of the tank, represent the Palestinian struggle, displacement, and silent suffering. Fatima Muhaidat et al.'s paper "Representing a Traumatized Nation in Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*" (2017) investigates postcolonial trauma in the novel, exploring examples of traumatized characters and Kanafani's techniques of conveying this trauma to the reader. In "The Diasporic Narrative: Identity Crisis in Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*" (2021), Raed Alqasass studies the psychological fragmentation of the

three Palestinian refugees in the light of Kanafani's employment of split narrative and double plot structures. Meanwhile, Jeyasiba Ponmani Sami and Narasingaram Jayashree's article, "Migration and Oil-Centric Life: A Study on Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun*" (2022), analyzes the novel as an example of Petro fiction, highlighting how oil capitalism is central to both geopolitical power structures and the individual fates of Kanafani's displaced characters. Together, these studies illustrate the aspects of war, occupation, and displacement, exposing the psychological and material conditions of statelessness.

Nevertheless, existing scholarship on both novels does not extend its analysis to the long-term precariousness that renders certain lives ungrievable and politically irrelevant. Moreover, no scholarship has compared *Men in the Sun* and *The Quiet American* together through a humanistic lens, despite their shared focus on the emotional, psychological, and existential consequences of war, colonization, and occupation. Most analyses approach these novels within separate geopolitical and historical contexts, overlooking the profound human cost of conflict that transcends cultural and national boundaries. This study bridges that gap by incorporating Judith Butler's theory of precarity into the analysis of both novels. Butler's framework extends Fanon's concept of colonial neurosis and Said's critique of exile by demonstrating how colonization and occupation continue to determine which lives are valued and which remain invisible and vulnerable. By reading the endings of *Men in the Sun* and *The Quiet American* through the lens of precarity, this paper argues that both novels expose a structural condition in which the colonized and occupied are not merely displaced but permanently excluded from political and historical recognition.

Graham Greene (1904–1991)

Greene was a prolific novelist, journalist, and writer deeply engaged with political themes, international affairs, and the moral ambiguities of power. His works reflect his keen interest in global conflicts, colonialism, and the destructive impact of Western intervention in foreign lands on human lives. Drawing from his own experiences as a war correspondent in French Indochina in the early 1950s, Greene wrote *The Quiet American* to expose the moral blindness of U.S. foreign policy, particularly its tendency to impose Western ideals on non-Western nations without fully understanding the historical, cultural, and political complexities of the regions involved.

The Quiet American

Published in 1955, *The Quiet American* is set during the First Indochina War, as French colonial rule in Vietnam collapses amid rising independence movements and growing American intervention⁽¹⁾. The narrative is presented through the perspective of Thomas Fowler, a cynical

British journalist, who finds himself involved in both the geopolitical struggle between Western colonial powers over Vietnam and a personal rivalry with Alden Pyle, a naïve and idealistic American CIA operative, over the beautiful young Vietnamese woman, Phuong. The triadic relationship involving Fowler, Pyle, and Phuong allegorizes the larger struggle over Vietnam's future and reinforces the novel's key themes of colonialism, ethical dilemmas of foreign intervention in Vietnam, and the human cost of war.

Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972)

Ghassan Kanafani was a prominent Palestinian writer, journalist, and politician whose literary works are deeply engaged with the Palestinian struggle for liberation. Kanafani used fiction as a means of articulating the experiences of displacement, exile, and statelessness that defined the lives of Palestinian refugees after the Nakba of 1948. Kanafani's writing is a form of political resistance; his novels and short stories have given voice to the silenced and challenged dominant historical narratives. Kanafani's legacy still lives on in contemporary discussions of Palestinian identity, resistance, and the role of literature in shaping historical memory.

Men In The Sun

Published in 1962, Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* explores the plight of Palestinian refugees in the aftermath of the 1948 Nakba, during which hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced from their homeland following the creation of the state of Israel⁽²⁾. The story follows three displaced men, Abu Qais, Assad, and Marwan, who embark on a risky journey from Iraq to Kuwait in search of a better future. They are transported by Abul Khaizuran, a former Palestinian fighter turned smuggler, in a water tanker. The novel's climax is both tragic and symbolic: the three men perish in the suffocating heat of the tanker, while Abul Khaizuran disposes of their bodies on a garbage heap after stealing their money. Their silent deaths underscore the novel's central themes of displacement, betrayal, and the dehumanizing effects of occupation and exile. *Men in the Sun* is a powerful allegory of the Palestinian condition, where exile, hopelessness, and historical injustice define existence.

Theoretical framework

Reading *The Quiet American* within a Western literary and ideological context, using Frantz Fanon's anticolonial theories in *Black Skins, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* as a framework, highlights its representation of colonial violence, psychological oppression, and the dehumanization of the colonized. Meanwhile, Edward Said's postcolonial critique—*The Question of Palestine* and *Reflections on Exile*—provides the foundation for interpreting *Men in the Sun* as an exploration of how occupation extends beyond physical control to psychological and cultural dislocation. This study employs Fanon's framework to analyze a Western novel and Said's to

examine an Eastern one, emphasizing the human dimensions of conflict, i.e., how war, colonization, and occupation shape both individual and collective identities beyond political and power structures. This dual approach, combining Western and Eastern perspectives, helps the paper highlight the intercultural dimensions of conflict, demonstrating how it transcends cultural boundaries by producing similar psychological and existential consequences in different historical and geographical contexts.

Frantz Fanon

Frantz Fanon (1925–1961) was a pioneering theorist of colonialism, violence, and decolonization, whose works remain essential to understand the psychological, cultural and social effects of imperial rule. In both *Black Skin, White Masks* and his later work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon explores the internalized racism and identity crisis experienced by colonized individuals, arguing that colonialism imposes a sense of inferiority that shapes their desires, behaviours, and cultural affiliations. These theories provide an interesting framework for re-reading Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* as an illustration of the human cost of colonial conflict that extends far beyond the battlefield.

Edward Said

Edward Said (1935–2003) was a leading Palestinian intellectual and a key figure in postcolonial studies. His two books *The Question of Palestine* and *Reflections on Exile* explore the political, historical, psychological, cultural, and social dimensions of colonialism and exile. Connections can be drawn between Said's concepts of displacement and identity and Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* to re-read the novel as a portrayal of the state of psychological rupture caused by exile, where Palestinians are trapped in a liminal space between memory and displacement, suffering from existential despair, cultural erasure, and social alienation.

A postcolonial reading of the two novels

Silence and passivity define the experiences of Greene's and Kanafani's colonized characters, shaping them into figures of political and psychological erasure. Phoung is introduced as a submissive and docile character. She is torn between the British cynicism of Fowler and the American idealism of Pyle. She rarely speaks, she is always spoken about and fought over: "One always spoke of her like that in the third person as though she were not there. Sometimes she seemed invisible like peace," says Fowler (56). This resonates with Fanon's description of cases of colonized individuals who experience inferiority, self-hatred, and alienation. Fanon calls these symptoms "colonial neurosis", i.e., a form of psychological trauma and internal conflict resulting from colonization (*Wretched* 21, 284). According to Fanon, colonial neurosis arises from the

negative social and cultural impacts of colonization on the colonized that fractures their identity. According to Fanon, society in a colonial world is divided into “compartments”: “The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. . . .” (*Wretched* 38). This compartmentalization enhances segregation between the colonizers and the colonized and enforces a dehumanizing environment where the colonized are treated as inferior subjects. This social alienation of the colonized creates a fractured sense of identity and develops into feelings of inferiority as they often come to see themselves through the lens of the colonizer's perspective. This leads in turn to what Fanon calls “cultural estrangement” or “cultural obliteration” (*Wretched* 210, 236).

Fanon's dynamics can be applied to Phuong's character, whose attitudes and choices exemplify the psychological, cultural, and social effects of colonialism reflected in her sense of alienation, dependency, and commodification. Her relationship with Fowler and Pyle highlights how colonial structures reduce colonized women to objects of desire and turn them into commodities within a system of exploitation. Both men want her, but they never see her as an independent entity. This relationship resembles the inauthentic love that emerges between the woman of color and the white man in the colonial world. Fanon argues: “authentic love remains impossible as feelings of inferiority... has not been purged” (*Black Skins* 34). Phoung mirrors this Fanonian idea; her sister, Miss Hei, seeks for her a relationship with any European man to achieve social elevation. The moment Miss Hei meets Pyle and learns that he is a wealthy American citizen, she shows a keen interest in him, prompting Fowler to sarcastically ask her whether she is “examining Mr. Pyle's marriageability” (52). She also attempts to attract Pyle's attention to Phoung's delicacy and dependence, emphasizing: “She is delicate... She needs care. She deserves care. She is very, very loyal” (53).

Phuong's passivity and submissiveness reflect the cultural hegemony of the colonizer, where Western ideals and perceptions are imposed on the identity and personality of colonized women. Like Mayotte Capécia, whose case Fanon studies in *Black Skin*, Phoung idealizes Fowler and Pyle. Mayotte, Fanon says, “loves a white man to whom she submits in everything. He is her lord. She asks nothing, demands nothing, except a bit of whiteness in her life” (42). Similarly, Phuong treats Fowler as her master, providing him all kinds of sensual pleasure. She wants him to marry her and help her move to live in London. However, when she discovers that his British wife declines his request for a divorce (180), she moves to Pyle's house, transferring her dreams from British aristocracy to American ideals, now envisioning a life near the Statue of Liberty.

Remarkably, Phuong's fascination with Western symbols, such as the British Royal Family (181) and the Statue of Liberty (214), aligns with Fanon's theories on cultural alienation and

internalized colonialism. Fanon explores how colonial subjects internalize the values of the colonizer, leading to a psychological dependency on Western ideals which Fanon calls the “epidermalization of inferiority,” where the colonized seek validation through the culture of their oppressors (*Black Skin* 13). Similarly, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues that colonialism disrupts indigenous cultural identity and replaces it with a myth of Western superiority, leading colonized individuals to aspire to Western lifestyles while being structurally excluded from them:

Every effort is made to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behaviour, to recognize the unreality of his "nation," and, in the last extreme, the confused and imperfect character of his own biological structure. (236)

Thus, Phuong’s admiration for these symbols reflects the desire for assimilation into a colonial identity. Rather than asserting her own cultural individuality, Phuong becomes a product of colonial mythmaking, adapting to a system where her worth is determined by how desirable she is to Western men. Consequently, she experiences internalized feelings of inferiority and self-alienation, embodying Fanon’s assertion that colonial rule is not just a political and economic structure but a system that erases identity and self-worth.

Just as Phuong’s silence in *The Quiet American* reflects her political and existential erasure within the postcolonial framework, the passivity and silent deaths of Abu Qais, Marwan, and Assad in *Men in the Sun* expose the profound dehumanization imposed by occupation and exile. Unlike traditional narratives of resistance, the Palestinian characters in *Men in the Sun* have accepted their displacement and statelessness as an unavoidable reality. Like Phuong, who exists as a colonized woman caught between imperial forces, the three Palestinian men are victims of a system that renders them powerless. Their silent death, their inability to knock the walls of the tanker, is a forced condition rather than a personal choice; their death is a stark metaphor for the voicelessness of the displaced.

In *Men in the Sun*, displacement is represented as a psychological burden that forces the three men into a state of silent resignation rather than active resistance. Their passivity is not a personal failing but a direct result of the colonial and political structures that have rendered them powerless. Their silence is not merely a literary device but a profound symptom of psychological exhaustion, reflecting the internalized dehumanization caused by years of statelessness and dispossession. This resonates with Edward Said’s argument that exile is not only a loss of homeland but also a force that produces shame, cultural erasure, and social disintegration.

In *The Question of Palestine* and *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said presents exile as a historical and political condition that does not simply displace people but actively dismantles their sense of self, community, and historical continuity. Said argues that exile is not just a physical condition but a deep psychological, cultural, and social crisis, particularly for Palestinians who have been displaced due to Israeli occupation. He describes exile as an “unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place”, an existential state of rootlessness, where Palestinians are unable to establish a permanent sense of belonging in their host countries yet also cannot return home (*Reflections* 173). The psychological distress of exile, Said explains, is not just about longing for a homeland but about being trapped in a state of political and cultural uncertainty, where memory, identity, and displacement constantly shape one’s existence. The Palestinian exile, Said adds, is unique because it is not merely the movement of people across borders but the erasure of an entire national identity, turning them into people defined by their dispossession. He states that the exiled “lives an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider” (*Reflections* 181). He also warns against the loss of Palestinian identity that risks “the danger of being swallowed up in” broader Arab culture, making it difficult to preserve distinct traditions, leading to a cultural erasure that further disconnects them from their homeland (*The Question* 155). Worse still, Said argues that exile disrupts social cohesion, forcing Palestinian communities into dependence on “international agencies like the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)” and on “refugee camps in one or another Arab country”, as well as unstable political structures, rather than a stable national framework or the traditional social unity of their lost homeland (*The Question* 130-131).

To fully grasp the significance of the silent deaths in *Men in the Sun*, it is crucial to examine how displacement has stripped the three men of the ability to act independently, make choices, and assert control over their own lives. Their forced exile has created a form of psychological dehumanization and has deprived them of their identity to the point where their suffering and even their deaths become invisible. Abu Qais, Assad, and Marwan embody the psychological despair, cultural dislocation, and social fragmentation that Said identifies as the inevitable effects of exile. Abu Qais, the eldest, experiences the psychological distress of exile, which leaves Palestinians torn between a longing for home and the existential weight of displacement. Like Said’s exiled Palestinians, Abu Qais “cannot free himself from the scandal of his total exile” (*The Question* 154). The fading memories of his homeland and his longing to feel the soil of Palestine once more have transformed him into a passive, helpless figure, unable to reclaim his past or shape his future. Assad, the middle-aged refugee, embodies the psychological paradox experienced by exiled Palestinians who are continuously exploited and rejected. His fate highlights Said’s assertion that “the achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind

forever” (*Reflections* 173). Marwan, the youngest, represents a generation born into exile, forced to navigate a world where survival is the only goal, and dreams of home are abstract and unattainable. Unlike Abu Qais, Marwan, the youngest, represents a generation born into exile; he grows up without a direct connection to Palestine. His story shows that exile is not just an individual tragedy but a generational burden. His father abandons the family to remarry, and his older brother, Zakaria, stops supporting them after getting married. Both leave Marwan to assume the responsibilities of a father figure at a young age and force him to quit his dream of becoming “a doctor” (43). His hardships are all consequences of exile. This resonates with Said’s argument that Palestinians in exile, even those who have never seen their homeland, cannot construct their lives outside of Palestine since “every Palestinian achievement” in exile is “ruined” by “its impermanence,” “its groundlessness,” and the lack of a Palestinian agency (*The Question* 154-155).

In the light of Said’s theories, *Men in the Sun* also emerges as a profound commentary on the social consequences of exile, showing how displacement dismantles Palestinian social structures, forces the exiled into a survivalist mindset, and breaks down traditional bonds of solidarity. Abu Qais, Assad, and Marwan have no family structures to support them, nor a homeland to return to, making them completely dependent on external forces for survival. Abu Qais, after losing the “ten Olive trees” he once owned in his Palestinian village, has lived “like a beggar” for ten years, unable to build a house or to send his son Qais to school (26-27). He is forced to seek economic survival abroad, which underscores how exile dismantles familial stability and renders fathers powerless providers. Assad’s story reflects how marriage in exile is reduced to a transaction rather than a mutual social and sacred commitment. His uncle forces him to marry his daughter, Nada. Unlike traditional patriarchal structures where men have control over their personal and financial futures, exile reduces Assad to a position where he is pressured into marriage due to economic vulnerability (31-33). Marwan, on the other hand, represents the younger generation forced into premature adulthood because of his father’s abandonment and his brother’s indifference. This shift in familial roles emphasizes how displacement forces children into economic struggles and robs them of their youth and education. The three refugees’ struggle to reach Kuwait reflects the collapse of Palestinian solidarity, as exile forces individuals into self-preservation rather than communal support.

One of the most tragic elements in *Men in the Sun* is the lack of Palestinian solidarity that leads to betrayal and exploitation from fellow Palestinians. Abul Khaizuran, therefore, becomes a symbol of internal betrayal. Abul Khaizuran, the smuggler, is himself a Palestinian exile, yet he profits from the suffering of other refugees. His indifference to the men’s suffering reaches its peak when, after their deaths in the suffocating heat of the tanker, he callously takes their

possessions, their money, and Marwan's watch, before leaving their bodies in a municipal garbage dump (73-74). His actions reflect how exile severs social ties and Palestinian collectiveness; rather than honouring their struggle or acknowledging their humanity, he disposes of them as if they were mere waste. This moment underscores how exile not only dehumanizes and humiliates Palestinians but also fosters exploitation and division among them, as those in position of relative power, like Abul Khaizuran, prey upon the desperation of their fellow exiles.

Said likens exile to a fate worse than death: "Exile...like death but without death's ultimate mercy, has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family and geography" (*Reflections* 174). Consequently, the famous final line, Abul Khaizuran's agonized cry of "Why didn't you knock on the sides of the tank? Why didn't you say anything? Why?" (74), powerfully embodies Said's concept. The dead refugees, suffocated in the heat of the tanker, no longer have voices, much like how Palestinian identity has been historically marginalized. Their deaths inside a tanker, silent and unnoticed, serve as a metaphor for the erasure of Palestinian identity and the existential suffering caused by exile (Alqasass 4). Their silence represents the voiceless condition of exiled Palestinians, whose suffering is ignored not just by the world but also by their fellow Arabs. The tanker, thus, becomes a symbol of cultural suffocation. Hence, the novel's ending does not offer any resolution or hope. Just as Said likens exile to a fate worse than death, leading to an existential cultural crisis, Kanafani presents a world in which Palestinian identity fades and suffocates under the weight of displacement.

Building on this postcolonial analysis, silence and passivity in both novels are not merely personal traits but structural conditions imposed by colonial and occupying forces, reinforcing the postcolonial idea that oppression extends beyond physical control to existential erasure. Fanon's concept of colonial neurosis explains how Phuong in *The Quiet American* embodies the internalization of colonial control; her passivity reflects a subjectivity reduced to the desires of the colonizer. Similarly, Said's argument that occupation is not just about land but about the erasure of identity applies to *Men in the Sun*, where Abu Qais, Assad, and Marwan's suffering represents not only material dispossession but also existential invisibility. The inability of Phuong and the three men to resist, act, or even voice their suffering is not a sign of individual weakness but a direct product of the colonial and imperial systems that render them politically and socially unrecognizable. Through this shared theme of enforced silence, both novels expose the human cost of colonialism and occupation, not just through physical violence but also through the gradual erasure of identity, agency, and even the ability to be heard.

While Fanon's theory of anticolonialism and Said's critique of occupation and exile provide essential postcolonial insights, their frameworks fail to fully account for the persistent condition

of neglect and exclusion that continues to define the lives of the colonized and displaced. Fanon's analysis of dehumanization and psychological trauma focuses primarily on the internalization of colonial oppression and the potential for revolutionary resistance, but it does not explain what happens to those who remain trapped in postcolonial vulnerability without the possibility of liberation. Similarly, Said's discussion of exile exposes how dispossession erases national and cultural identity, yet it does not fully explore how this erasure extends beyond territorial loss into a permanent condition of existential marginalization and invisibility.

The authors of the two novels highlight this condition of exclusion and neglect in their narratives. Phuong and the three Palestinian refugees do not just suffer from colonial or occupational violence; they exist in a state of continuous political and existential abandonment, where their suffering remains unrecognized, and their deaths politically meaningless. In fact, Judith Butler's theory of precarity can account for this continuous cycle of exclusion and erasure. Her ideas provide a more comprehensive understanding of the human cost of conflict by revealing how colonial and imperial structures sustain ongoing vulnerability and neglect.

Theory of precarity

Judith Butler's theory of precarity fills this critical gap by demonstrating that colonial and imperial systems do not simply dehumanize or exile the oppressed; they create enduring conditions in which certain lives remain unprotected, ungrievable, and structurally vulnerable to erasure. In her book, *Precarious Life*, Butler argues that precarity is a politically enforced condition "under which certain human lives are more vulnerable than others, and thus certain human lives are more grievable than others" (30). She argues that, in the context of war, occupation, and colonialism, some lives are publicly mourned and memorialized, while others are erased, treated as collateral damage, or even justified losses. Butler critiques this hierarchy of grievability, showing how entire populations—such as Palestinians—are systematically framed as unworthy of mourning, making their deaths invisible in mainstream political discourse (35).

Building on Butler's theory, Phuong's silence and the refugees' muted deaths are not only symbolic of postcolonial violence but are also manifestations of an ongoing system that determines whose suffering is acknowledged and whose is forgotten. The endings of both novels thus become more than tragic conclusions; they reveal the long-term effects of colonial and imperial precarity, showing that oppression does not simply end with decolonization or exile but persists in the form of enduring structures that define who is visible, who is protected, and who disappears without recognition. This humanistic dimension makes these novels strikingly relevant to contemporary discussions on statelessness, war, and postcolonial trauma. Hence, their crises are not merely existential struggles, as they might initially appear in the novels, but rather the result of a politically

enforced structure that systematically renders them vulnerable, unprotected, and ultimately neglected. Through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of precarity, their silence and passivity are not just psychological conditions but symptoms of a broader mechanism that governs which lives are valued and which are left to disappear unnoticed.

In *The Quiet American*, Phuong exists in a state of extreme precarity, not only as a colonized subject but also as a colonized woman, whose independence is systematically denied by both Western imperialism and patriarchal structures. While Butler does not explicitly discuss the precarity of colonized women in *Precarious Life*, her broader argument on how political structures determine who is visible, protected, and grievable is crucial in understanding Phuong's marginalized status. Butler argues that "some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human" (*Precarious Life* xiv-xv). Phuong, caught between Fowler and Pyle, is never seen as a fully realized subject; her existence is only relevant in relation to the desires of the Western men around her. This structural invisibility mirrors the condition of the "subaltern" as described by Gayatri Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", where she argues that the voices of colonized women are systematically erased by both colonial and nationalist discourses. Spivak asserts that "in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (189). In other words, colonized women are denied the very ability to articulate their oppression within dominant power structures.

Similarly, in *Men in the Sun*, the Palestinian refugees exist in a condition of precarity, their lives marked by political erasure and existential silence. This precarity is fully realized in the novel's final scene, where the refugees die in silence inside the water tanker, their deaths unnoticed and unacknowledged. Butler argues that "if a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life; it does not qualify as a life and is not worth a note" (*Precarious Life* 34). Thus, through the lens of Judith Butler's theory, their unmarked deaths affirm the world's indifference to their existence and emphasize the idea that certain lives do not qualify as lives within dominant political and national narratives. Moreover, the absence of an obituary or burial for the refugees aligns with Butler's claim that grievability is the mechanism through which life is publicly recognized and valued, and that the "obituary" is "an act of nation-building". Its denial reduces individuals to the status of "unburiable bodies," permanently excluded from the framework of human recognition (34). Hence, the dehumanizing death of the three refugees and the absence of a dignified obituary are not just personal tragedies but are also political statements about statelessness and exclusion. Their disposability, therefore, symbolizes the rejection of the establishment of a Palestinian nation as the major global powers, supporting Israel's occupation, systematically deny Palestinians not only

their land but also their very right to be grieved, remembered, or politically acknowledged. Thus, the novel's ending is not merely a representation of death; it is an extension of the refugees' displacement, sealing their fate as lives that have never mattered, and still do not matter, in the eyes of the world.

Conclusion

To sum up, the application of Fanon's anticolonial theory to Phuong's character in *The Quiet American* reveals how colonialism functions not only through political and military control but also through the subjugation of individuals, particularly women, whose silence and passivity are imposed by structures of power. Phuong's silence is not a personal trait; rather, it is an enforced condition, a mechanism for survival within a world that refuses to grant her autonomy or voice. By situating her within Fanon's framework of psychological oppression, this study has demonstrated how her seeming passivity is, in fact, a consequence of colonialism's dehumanizing effects. Similarly, in *Men in the Sun*, the deaths of the three Palestinian refugees in complete silence serve as a poignant symbol of the erasure of the stateless. Drawing on Edward Said's postcolonial critical framework, this study argues that their silent deaths reflect the condition of Palestinian displacement, not just as a historical event but as an ongoing existential crisis. Their inability to resist or even symbolically protest their fate within the tanker highlights the broader reality of a whole nation whose people have been systematically silenced and suppressed by political and occupational forces. In this sense, the novel becomes a powerful allegory for the consequences of occupation, the gradual erosion of agency, identity, and even the ability to articulate suffering.

The incorporation of Judith Butler's theory of precarity extends the analysis beyond the historical contexts of the novels to demonstrate how cycles of vulnerability persist across time and place. Phuong's entrapment within structures of colonial desire and the refugees' erasure in the Kuwaiti desert are not isolated incidents; they rather exemplify a recurring pattern in which certain populations are rendered disposable by enforced political conditions. Butler's concept of precarity highlights how the state and global structures continue to determine whose lives are grievable and whose suffering is rendered invisible. Both Phuong and the three Palestinian refugees exist within a framework of neglect, marked by an imposed silence that signals their exclusion from the world's attention. By bringing Butler's insights into the discussion, this study has shown how the themes of colonial oppression and displacement in these novels resonate far beyond their immediate historical settings, continuing to reflect contemporary realities of war, occupation, and forced displacement.

In the end, this study demonstrates how literature captures the enduring human cost of conflict by dramatizing how colonial and postcolonial power structures shape individual and collective experiences across different cultural and historical contexts. By linking Fanon, Said, and Butler, this paper has provided a multidisciplinary lens through which we can understand the mechanisms of suppression in *The Quiet American* and *Men in the Sun*. This study also paves the way for further studies on contemporary refugee narratives. Future research could expand on these ideas by examining similar themes in other postcolonial and war literature to further explore the ways in which literature reflects the conditions of marginalization and precarity.

Conflicts of Interest

The author certifies that she has no affiliations or involvement with any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

¹- The *Quiet American* examines the consequences of colonial history in the context of ongoing imperialism and foreign intervention. The novel is framed by the French colonial rule in Vietnam (1887–1954) and is set during the First Indochina War (1946–1954), a time when the French were fighting to maintain control over Vietnam, and the country was struggling for independence culminating in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu (1954). The novel reflects the transition from French colonialism to American intervention, as the United States, fearing the spread of communism in Vietnam, began secret operations supporting a "Third Force" led by figures like General Trinh Minh Thé, whom Greene fictionalizes as General Thé (Logevall 375).

²- The novel is set during the Nakba (1948), which led to the displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians following the establishment of Israel. The events of the novel take place between the 1950s and 1960s, reflecting the harsh realities of the Palestinian refugees who, facing poverty and exile in camps across the Arab world, sought economic opportunities in the oil-rich Gulf states, particularly Kuwait. The journey of the three men in Kanafani's novel dramatizes the bureaucratic obstacles, exploitation, and the dangers of illegal smuggling encountered by Palestinian refugees, exposing the broader failure of Arab governments to support the Palestinian cause.

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