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Anonymous. Submitted May 10, 2021.

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Corresponding author: Anonymous

Author contact: [al-raida@lau.edu.lb](mailto:al-raida@lau.edu.lb)

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## Book Review: Atshan, S. (2020). *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique*.

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The members of the contemporary Levantine queer community have become the subject of focus in a series of debates. However, most of these arguments adopt a Western-based queer theory framework in order to understand the realities and struggles of Levantine queer individuals; this is a limitation that persists across various research pursuits focused on queer communities in the Levant. In *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique*, Sa'ed Atshan illustrates the parameters of the critique of queerism for Palestinians, be it those who are currently residing in Palestine, or within the diaspora. Atshan defines the critique of queerism as the queer Palestinian individual's ability to redefine their identity, devoid of Western apprehensions of queerism. Atshan constructs the critique based on the reality of Palestinian queer individuals, while considering their contemporary struggles. Atshan's work exemplifies the collective strife for identification with two concepts that have otherwise been considered to be mutually exclusive: an Arab Palestinian nationalist and a queer individual. Atshan also looks into these parameters through an objective lens that attempts to decode the differences between the upper-middle class and the lower classes. Importantly, Atshan's book adds another important component to the academic field of literature on the subject of queer critique in the Middle

East: The book focuses on queer women, who are often marginalized within the queer community.

Atshan looks into the familial, religious, local, ideological, and national, as well as the transnational and diasporic realities of contemporary Palestinian queer discourse, devoid of its pinkwashed Western perceptions. For example, homophobia's clash with nationalism is explicitly deconstructed in an analysis that does not fail to observe the varying components that merge the two otherwise opposing ends of the spectrum. Atshan also touches upon the delicacies of religion and its hindrances pertaining to the performative queer identity. Throughout the book, Atshan tells the story of Palestinian queer activists who have altered the course of Arab queerism, even though most of their names remain anonymous for safety reasons. Atshan's understanding of "Arab queerism" is unlike Joseph Massad's famous representation of the Arab queer identity. Atshan states that "in denying agency to LGBTQ Arabs, the gay international paradigm," originally coined by Massad, "re-enforces Orientalism." Further, Atshan argues that "Massad portrays Arab culture as static and Western influence in the region as inherently coercive" (p. 192). The remainder of the book goes on to create a new lens through which to observe the Palestinian and Levantine queer narrative.

As illustrated throughout the rest of this review, Atshan uses the book as a medium for discussing the perils of the Arab queer identity without romanticizing its struggles or belittling the different external factors that hamper its advancement. "I dream of queer Palestinians overcoming the surveillance and disenfranchisement—both discursive and embodied—that they face from many directions, although I recognize that these forces do not all wield the same power" (p. 216). The book is an academic portal to references and accounts that are seldom

heard, but are frequently lived by many who belong to the Palestinian queer community, and the Arab queer community more broadly. Atshan's preface looks into his own personal journey of self-discovery as a queer Palestinian. The author considers himself to embody the struggles of other queer individuals who, even when silent, feel threatened.

Atshan considers this book to be a "critique of critiques," since it observes the current discourse regarding Middle Eastern queer studies and sheds light on the shortcomings of the field's current arguments (p. 213). Hence, it brings about a sense of speculation regarding the nature of the Arab queer identity, predominantly the Palestinian one, which might be deemed a significant contribution to the realm of Middle Eastern queer studies. Palestinian queer activism or Palestinian activism, in general, is not merely one layer of conflict against homophobia or misrepresentation, since the Palestinian conflict is regional, ideological, geographic, and most importantly, political in its essence. Consequently, the Palestinian queer dilemma is unlike those of the Arab world. Thus, Atshan's analysis and the narrowed scope of this book are academically celebratory, since they do not undermine the experience of the Palestinian queer community while giving equal importance to its diasporic counterparts.

The book is divided into five main chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter is chronological, and traces the initiation and evolution of the Palestinian queer narrative. The author adopts an ethnographic approach to look into the various aspects of the Palestinian queer individual's struggles, ranging from their heterogeneity to the notion of Palestinian homophobia, in order to explain the subjective nature of the Palestinian queer experience. The second and third chapters are oriented towards understanding the realities of Palestinian queer

individuals, specifically. Within these two chapters, the author recounts debates regarding pinkwashing and pinkwatching as per the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. According to Atshan:

Pinkwashing is defined as a discourse on Israeli LGBTQ rights aimed at detracting attention from violations of Palestinian human rights. The term has become salient in queer activist and academic circles around the world. The dynamic that this term signifies is as follows: rather than improve its global standing by providing Palestinians with basic human rights, the Israeli state and its supporters, increasingly moving to the right, seek to market Israel as a state that supports LGBTQ individuals and communities. (p. 3)

On a similar note, “pinkwatching” is defined as the attempt to deconstruct “pinkwashing” through various forms of activism. In the third chapter, pinkwatching is predominantly linked to the reality of Pride, be it the parade or the emotional dimension of queer identification. The author’s choice of examples of pinkwashing and pinkwatching is particularly interesting because it illustrates the diversity in the homophobic and heteronormative standards of the queer Israeli-Palestinian individual. These examples actively deconstruct any underlying assumptions that the reader might hold in relation to queer emancipation in Israel and Palestine. However, Atshan’s discussion of pinkwashing and pinkwatching constructs an almost universal queer identity, in the form of a queer “solidarity,” glossing over important differences in relation to the ways that queer Palestinians either embrace or challenge dominant nationalist narratives. Atshan explains that while this may be the case in the ideology of the collective queer struggle, when looking at the case of Palestinian queer individuals, their national identity overpowers their queer identity.

In the fourth chapter of the book, the author illustrates the relationship and discrepancies between the notion of the Global Queer Community compared to that of the Palestinian one. Atshan strives to show the thin line between various facets of the Palestinian

queer identity, representing it as an entity that is not fragmented and contradictory. Atshan uses journalistic examples and snippets of media representation to explain that there cannot be a distinction between the queer individual and the Palestinian queer individual. Yet, although they mirror each other, the Palestinian queer is far more politicized than the global queer. There is a vivid description of the divergence between the reality of the Palestinian, or Arab, queer community's struggles in tandem with the Western world's romanticized and limited perception of them. The author utilizes films produced by Israelis and internationals who deliberately pinkwash the Palestinian queer individual's identity through cinematic affairs that embody the conflict while reinforcing a particular agenda. The author alludes to significant gaps and limitations within these works that haunt media platforms of the global community while implicitly promoting their politicized agendas of representation. Atshan explicates this narrative by focusing on the representation of the queer individual as an embodiment of a "modern" and relatively "Western" way of life, who ought to be salvaged by the progressive regime. Atshan goes against this collective apprehension by stating that:

The juxtaposition of Israeli legal tolerance and Palestinian homophobia is misleading to audiences outside of Israel/Palestine. The reality is that Israelis, including Israeli settlers in the Occupied Territories, are governed by Israeli civil law, while Palestinians in the Occupied Territories are governed by both Palestinian Authority law and the legal regime of the Israeli military occupation. These sets of laws do not criminalize homosexuality. (p. 146)

Here, Atshan refers to the cultural and legislative norms regarding the status of homosexuality.

The conclusion of the chapter demonstrates the extent to which pinkwashing is used to romanticize and Orientalize the Palestinian queer narrative.

In Chapter Five, Atshan explores scholarly representations of Palestinian queer identities. This chapter caters to the needs of many gender studies scholars who aspire to comprehend the limited as well as misconstrued representation of queer Palestinians. The chapter includes two theoretical frameworks that are often adopted by Western-based scholars: the concept of the “gay international” and the concept of “homonationalism.” Atshan refers here to Joseph Massad’s concept of the “gay international,” explaining that it is imperialist to limit one’s queer identity to state repression (p.189). Meanwhile, Atshan reinforces Jasbir Puar’s definition of homonationalism, which “describe[s] the phenomenon by which certain nation-states incorporate some queer subjects while disavowing other subjects (such as Arabs, Muslims, Sikhs, and South Asians)” (p. 31). The author explores both frameworks to understand their implications for the Palestinian solidarity movement which is growing to include queer Palestinians. Atshan suggests a novel approach to the Palestinian queer movement, arguing that its Western interpretation has shortcomings that cannot be adjusted to the Middle Eastern narrative, since the nature of the struggles of identification of western queer individuals are different than those of Middle Eastern queer individuals. The analysis proceeds to contrast the reality of queer activism in the West and the Middle East. It shows that the Middle Easterner’s safety, security, and the risks impinging on the activist’s survival are far greater than those of the activists of the West who, although struggling in their own way, have the ability to attain, maintain, and retain their survival.

Although the book makes space within the Western academy for Palestinian queer activists and queer folks, the book is written from the perspective of an individual who, although growing up Palestinian, has not been a permanent resident of Palestine since the Second

Intifada. The experiences as well as analyses foregrounded in the book are those of a member of the diaspora community who is observing the reality of local Palestinian queer individuals instead of experiencing them. The counterargument, of course, is that perhaps it would have been impossible to publish such an academic work had Atshan remained in Palestine. Thus, both the first-hand experience as well as the ability to publish a book such as this have a grounding stance, since those elements are often mutually exclusive.

The book concludes by arguing that sexuality intersects with ideology, but there are certain burdens and limitations that not only challenge the peaceful survival of queer Palestinians, but that these factors might also entail a sense of extinction.

Over the course of my life, I have experienced how many Zionists want to wish away the Palestinian subject and many homophobes want to wish away the queer subject. I have also been a firsthand witness to the radical purist desire to wish away the queer Palestinian subject whose voice and experience does not neatly map onto a single ideological framework. I do not draw moral equivalence between these three forces but instead recognize how they intersect under the empire of critique. Although the intentions underlying these forces are often different, their effects can be similar. This book speaks to the silence and erasure that stems from all of these directions. Queer liberation cannot be realized while colonial subjugation persists, but the movement toward dignity for queer people should not be expected to wait until the realization of national liberation. Decoupling these struggles is ultimately impossible; they are inextricably linked. (pp. 221-222)

The realistic and rationally depicted concluding pages look into the parameters of survival for Arab queers in general and Palestinian queers in particular, explaining that performing one's identity and being socially accepted are not two sides of the same coin, but rather, two swords pointing at one queer individual: this person has to choose either to conform to their true self



and suffer the social clutches and limitations, or they have to appeal to the collective ideology and sacrifice their true identity. Atshan discusses the future of the Palestinian queer community, which is a topic that is seldom, if ever, tackled. Atshan illustrates that there is the ongoing need for the queer individual's creation of an elusive utopia; this utopian thought is considered to be the only known cure to a depleting reality that leaves no room for queer identities' performativity within the Palestinian realm. In the case of Palestinian queer individuals, this "economy of desire" is perceived as a sacrifice of nationality and individuality, as Atshan ends the book by paying tribute to a queer Palestinian friend who did not have the means to persist in surviving (p. 215). The last line of the book quotes a poem which states that "we were never meant to survive."

However, it is the author's and his contemporaries' pursuits, which are exemplified in the writing of this book, that go against this thought to establish a sense of hope for the queer Palestinian in particular and the queer Arab in general. Although the strife for identification as an Arab is one that consists of its own conflicting components, the representation of these struggles may be read as a stepping stone to their salvation. Atshan explains that in order to attain any form of progress within the Arab queer realm, one needs to begin by ensuring the proper means of representation that does not exoticize and Orientalize the queer subject. Atshan might not live to see the emancipation of the queer Palestinian identity as a performative one, both on the basis of nationalism and queerism. Nonetheless, the sense of queer utopianism ought to be embraced to continue the battle against patriarchal homophobia and impregnating the future with a Palestinian reality that does not exclude its queer factions.

## References

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