

Sa'ed Atshan, **Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique**, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020, 296 pp., \$28.00 (paperback).

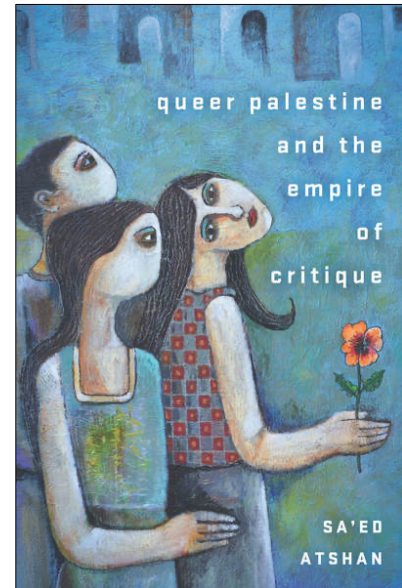
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Sa'ed Atshan's **Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique** provides a crucial intervention in Palestinian Studies and queer theories that examines the Queer Palestinian movements. The author names the empire of critique as a prioritization of criticism in scholarship that stalls on-the-ground movements for queer lives of Palestinians. In this monograph, he uses autoethnography, ethnography, and evaluations of critical junctures to produce anthropological foundations and critical analysis of Queer Palestine.

Atshan fills gaps in the history of the movement of Queer Palestinians that grounds its work in an ethnography of activist communities in Israel/Palestine and in the diaspora, thus, writing a lived critique birthed from the people on the ground. Crucially, this text is an intervention and analysis of critiques of the global Queer Palestine movement. Atshan's text challenges radical purism critiques of anti-imperialism that led to the disillusionment, frustration, and fatigue precipitating the movement's current plateau. By historically retracing through this anthropological historiography, Atshan writes of history that enacts the very missions of the Queer Palestine movement: increasing the visibility of queer Palestinians locally and globally, and fighting for the right to be counted. Thus, this book powerfully serves "as a contribution to knowledge production and theorization in studies of the Middle East, Israel/Palestine, anthropology, queer theory, peace and conflict studies, and literature on social movements" (p. 10).

To do this, Atshan defines key concepts that the global Queer Palestine movement works within and against—specifically, pinkwashing, pinkwatching, ethnoheteronormativity, empire of critique, natural and toxic plateaus of social movements, Zionism, Palestinian nationalism, and radical purism. These concepts contextualize the Queer Palestine movement, furthering conversations through his own analytical terminology that strengthens this historiography and critical analysis. Atshan defines pinkwashing as a discourse on Israel's LGBTQ rights movements that aims to take attention away from Israel's violations of Palestinian human rights. In response, global Queer Palestinian activists engage in pinkwatching, the deconstructing and debunking of these pinkwashing activities.

Atshan defines ethnoheteronormativity as the reality that is a "result of life as racialized queer subjects experiencing intertwined oppression from dual systems of ethnocracy on one hand and heteronormativity and toxic masculinity on the other" (p. 10). This new formulation creates opportunities for understanding queer Palestinians' realities in Israel/Palestine and their work as activists. Similarly, he furthers intellectual foundations in social movements studies, anthropology, queer theory, peace and conflict studies,



and Israel/Palestine and Middle East studies by developing the concept of “empire of critique” that so deeply damages these social movements (p. 13). He formulates a transformation of the “critique of empire not an ‘empire of critique’ in which queer Palestinians—and to a large extent, many of their allies—find themselves under numerous overlapping regimes of surveillance, suspicion, and control” (p. 13). The empire of critique is a theoretical framework that grounds Atshan’s analysis, demonstrating how prioritizing critique of these social movements further disenfranchises queer Palestinians (in Israel/Palestine and globally); encourages a battle between, and development of, a hierarchy of oppressions; and stalls the growth of the Queer Palestine movement. Through these conceptions, Atshan argues that this empire of critique damages the ability of important social justice movements to grow in this contested area.

Atshan’s text moves through five different politics—the ordinary, pinkwashing, boycotts, representation, and academia. This organization deploys a proposition for pluralism of thought and practice that genuinely allows for “transnational reciprocal solidarity” (pp. 26, 212). In chapter 1, Atshan focuses on “the Politics of the Ordinary,” tracing the rise of the LGBTQ Palestinian movement in Israel/Palestine that derives its power from ordinary acts and existence under the extraordinary context of “ethnoheteronormativity” (pp. 28, 70).

In chapter 2, Atshan traces how the conceptions of victims and saviors actually complicate conversations around queerness in Israel/Palestine, dedicating attention to Israel’s pinkwashing moves to define itself on the “right side” of the argument and Palestinians as the homophobes. He is careful not to elide the homophobia that is indeed present in Palestine, while naming the problematic constructions that erase the violence toward Palestinians and queer folks in Israel/Palestine that Israel perpetuates. Atshan defines “discursive disenfranchisement,” returning repeatedly to this as the effort to “prohibit queer Palestinians from speaking for themselves,” a tactic used in pinkwashing (p. 74). In presenting these tactics, he names disingenuous efforts, demonstrating the false equivalence of queer Israelis and queer Palestinians that do not consider the power differential created by the Israeli occupation and oppression of Palestinians.

In chapter 3, the author discusses transnational activism boycotts, defining the Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions movements and the queer Palestinian counterpart that fights against the Israeli occupation of Palestine. By historicizing moments of Israel/Palestine and the global queer social movement where critiques silence and diminish the work, Atshan demonstrates how social theory and peace and conflict studies give us conceptual tools to “transcend the impasse of queer Palestinian transnational activism” (p. 114). The moments he retells through autoethnography and ethnography define the “social life of critique” (p. 137), and how critique, while potentially productive, can damage the broader movement for queer Palestinian lives. This is defined as “the way critiques from differently positioned actors intersect and subsequently constrain the types of discourse that are possible” (p. 137). This, in Atshan’s view, is a key concern and guiding principle of this monograph: naming and challenging how these critiques determine who is disenfranchised, critiquing less constructively and more obstructively.

Atshan engages media and film in chapter 4, to affirm that the movement needs to transcend the “impulse to exclusively promote representations that align with a purist politics” (p. 145), to move through the current plateau the queer Palestine global and local movement is facing. This chapter analyzes journalistic and film representations of queer Palestinians and the movement, challenging flat representations that do not allow

for nuance and heterogeneity of queer Palestinian experiences, subjectivities, and ideologies. He discusses the reactions of various LGBTQ Palestinian organizations, like Al-Qaws and Aswat, to representations of queer Palestinians in fictional and documentary films, journalistic reports, and the participation of various films, groups, and filmmakers in film festivals and events sponsored by Israel. News stories about queer Palestinians like Abu Hanna, a young trans Palestinian woman who dealt with the "racist Israeli society and transphobic Palestinian environment," or Zia "Zizo" Abul Hawa, who participated in the Jerusalem Pride parade as their act of resistance, demonstrate the conflicting ways in which queer Palestinian activists have responded to various experiences of queerness in Israel/Palestine (p. 148). This chapter furthers Atshan's views on critique fatigue that queer Palestinian activists experience, challenging readers to do constructive critique that promotes change and transformation.

Atshan's final analytical chapter (chapter 5) brings a searing critique of academic writings around Queer Palestine and the global queer Palestinian movement, challenging academics to be productive in their writing, grounding it in the lived experiences of queer Palestinians in the country, instead of in the Western/U.S.-based ivory tower of criticism. Focusing on two Western-based scholars' theoretical frameworks often applied to the global queer Palestinian solidarity movement, Atshan offers a powerful analysis of how the works of Jasbir Puar and Joseph Massad are not engaging with the lived experiences of queer Palestinians on the ground. He argues that Massad's critique of Queer Palestine is a form of erasure, not grounded in the reality of Queer Palestinians. Similarly, he names South Asian American queer theorist Jasbir Puar and Lebanese American anthropologist Maya Mikdashi's published critique of the Queer Palestinian solidarity movement as deeply demoralizing for members of the global (and local) queer Palestinian [solidarity] movement.

Atshan demonstrates how academics in the West should not write as "ultimate authorities on analyzing and representing the 'passive Orient' and making it legible for itself and others" (p. 193). The problem is how scholars set themselves up as being superior in knowledge of and understanding the subaltern's situation better than they do themselves, as if they are incompetent in sharing their own realities. This final chapter efficiently arrives at Atshan's goals: a call for ethnographic and autoethnographic work, grounding writings about queer Palestine *in* queer Palestine and Palestinians' lived experiences. Atshan calls on academics to be self-reflexive in their approaches and goals, pushing writers to consider who they are accountable to when they write. He invites Western-based scholars to practice a radical "reciprocal solidarity," instead of, in efforts to advance their own scholarship, further splintering and demoralizing solidarity activism (p. 212).

Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique is a call to academics to identify and practice the difference "between critique and criticism" (p. 212), understanding critique is necessary if it is productive, but not when it further polices subaltern subjectivities. "We were never meant to survive" (p. 215), he writes, (an homage to Audre Lorde), presenting readers with imaginings for how the global and local queer Palestine movement can move beyond its current demoralized plateau to continued flourishing and queering the idea of Palestine itself. His work fills gaps and addresses the silences and deliberate erasures in Palestine studies, Middle East studies, Middle East anthropology, queer theories, and peace and conflict studies, showing how "queer liberation cannot be realized while colonial subjugation persists," because these struggles are "inextricably linked" (p. 222). Scholars and students engaged in Israel/Palestine and settler colonial struggles will benefit from this auto/ethnographic text of subjectivities on the ground.