
Reviewed by Lana Shehadeh

The topic of queer rights and their mere existence as a reality have been highly contested in the Arab world. Many argue that given the political conditions of occupation in the territories, LGBTQ+ rights do not have a place within the activist space. In his book, titled *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique*, Sa’ed Atshan takes on a scholarly-activist role to challenge and narrate the course of queer rights movements in Palestine. Not only is this monumental work essential in understanding the struggle of LGBTQ+ movements in Palestine, but also in learning the intrinsic nature of Israeli occupation. For queer Palestinians, Atshan argues that the struggle is not limited to the homophobic sentiment engraved within the Arab Palestinian society, but rather it is present in the nature of the Zionist occupation that entraps queer Palestinians with blackmail and continued repression. Queer and transgendered Palestinians are, thus, stuck between a repressive occupation and a homophobic society. For Atshan, as a gay Palestinian man and a Palestinian rights activist, the topic hits close to home. *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique* is split into five chapters with an introduction and conclusion.

The author introduces his readers to the realities of LGBTQ+ movements in Palestine and the difficulties of existing within the paradox of the homophobic and Zionist occupation. In the first chapter, Atshan narrates the realities under which gay Palestinians live and includes live experiences of queer men and women. In chapter two, he details the injustices and exploitation brought about by the Israeli authorities through *pinkwashing*, exposing the homophobic tendencies of Palestinian society to mask Israeli violations of human rights and homophobia in general. Chapter three, however, concentrates on *pinkwatching*, which is the counter to *pinkwashing*. *Pinkwatching* is organizations and allies of queer Palestinians movements using their platforms to resist and expose the occupation. In chapter four, Atshan targets the media and the portrayal of queer Palestinians in films and journalistic pieces. In chapter five he delves into the negative portrayal of queer movements in Palestine, illustrating the need for more nuanced approaches from an academic perspective. And lastly, he concludes by acknowledging the need for a self-reflective branch of academia specifically when

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approaching disenfranchised and ill-represented groups, such as queer Palestinians. While acknowledging his own effort to be self-reflective and conscious of his own biases and background, he approaches the topic of the rise and challenges of LGBTQ+ movements in Palestine objectively.

Atshan’s analysis sheds light on the experience of LGBTQ+ movements in Palestine, not only from his own experience as a queer Palestinian man but also from the experiences of the subjects he interviewed. Narrating the stories of gay men and women interviewed during the author’s field visits illustrates the severe beatings and reprimands some had received from family relatives and loved ones. Others have had their personal security and safety severely jeopardized due to the disclosure of their sexuality. The author walks his readers through some difficult stories and experiences, as well as the better ones like “Hosni” and “Rayan.” They are a Palestinian couple that came out to their supportive parents. Both men had never been to Jerusalem before; Atshan chronicles their trip to the holy city and their need to request assistance from their non-Palestinian friends just to be able to rent a hotel room in the city. To illustrate the challenges of queer Palestinians, he narrates not only the injustices received from the Israeli authority, but also those projected by the Palestinian society. He does, however, remind us of the dangers of pinkwashing. Although Palestinian society is prejudiced against queer Palestinians, he asserts, such prejudices should not mask the Israeli occupation and its treatment of LGBTQ+ Palestinians, regardless of their sexuality.

Additionally, homing in on the tactics of pinkwashing and the need to illustrate the danger of victim and savior tropes, Atshan uses Sarah Schulman’s concept of “superiority by asserting one’s status as abused and the implied consequential right to punish without terms.”1 Israelis, based on the work of Schulman and Atshan, use their status and previous victimhood as a mode to inflict and mask injustices invoked on Palestinians. Whether they are the attempts made at popularizing the claim that Yaser Arafat, the chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, is gay or the claims that Palestinians are all homophobic, Atshan illustrates the continued efforts of Israeli supporters to discredit the injustices inflicted on the Palestinian people.

He sets out to understand the stark difference between criticizing and critiquing the queer movements in Palestine. This effort is driven by Atshan’s own understanding of scholarship on queer Palestinians and the famous book, entitled *Desiring Arabs*, by Joseph Massad, which explores Arab sexuality and the existence of homosexuality in the Arab world. Massad does not trace queer movements and activism in the Arab world but criticizes the existence of homosexuality as an identity in the region. According to Massad, although homosexual acts exist, the actual identity of homosexuality is a Western construct rejected by the Arab reality.2 For Atshan, Massad’s work was initially captivating. However, as Atshan
embarked on his own journey of self-discovery in understanding queer existence in the Arab world and more specifically in the Palestinian territories, he realized his lack of identification with Massad’s work and its homophobic nature.

Ultimately, Atshan sets out to examine the unchartered territory of queer movements in Palestine. He immaculately illustrates the development of movements along with the challenges they face by both conservative Palestinians and Arabs at large and by the repressive occupation. This work is pioneering and fills a significant gap within Middle East Studies. His contribution is not limited to its concentration on queer Palestinians as a subject matter, but it also strategically introduces the complexity of the occupation’s mistreatment of queer Palestinians.

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