

Ibtisam Azem`s *The Book of Disappearance: A Critique of Settler Colonialism in Middle East*

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Abstract:

This paper aims to bring forth a critical and truthful question of twenty first century contemporary era, where people vanish overnight from their homes leaving no traces behind. The research will investigate ongoing subjugation and the notion of settler colonial project of Israel in Middle East in *The Book of Disappearance* (2019) by Ibtisam Azem through the lens of Patrick Wolfe`s (2006) settler colonialism theory. Azem dramatizes the systematic exclusion and unexpected disappearance of racialized and colonized groups and the institutional practices after the Nakba (1948). The novel focuses on the issue of sudden disappearance of Arab community from Palestine/Israel that causes a serious social and political unrest among the settlers. The study also highlights the entrenched Israeli policy to free the sacred land from Palestinian Muslims through their settler project since the Nakba (1948). The paper bridges Azem`s Palestinian narrative with Patrick Wolfe`s (2006) settler colonial theory, which defines the erasure of colonized Muslim population in a dystopian state of Israel. The systematic and ongoing process of elimination where the sovereign can have the power to decide to live and let live. The study will investigate the questions of erasure, displacement and replacement of indigenous population in a self-proclaimed democratic state of Israel to accentuate politics of settler groups. How politics of the sovereign works to eliminate the physical presence of marginalized groups on the basis of their ethnic and religious association in Azem`s *The Book of Disappearance*. The study critiques the Zionist project of Israeli settlement and elimination of indigenous people as an ultimate goal of settlers in Middle East.

Keywords: *The Book of Disappearance*, settler colonialism, elimination, ethnic cleansing, Palestinian literature.

Introduction:

“That is how you described your days, and those people who were forced to leave and go beyond the sea. But you didn’t say that the population of the city went from 100,000 down to 4,000”. (Azem, 2019). A Palestinian journalist and novelist Ibtisam Azem in her seminal work *The Book of Disappearance* (2014) explores the idea of establishment of settler colonial Jewish state as an essential part of Zionist project in a forcefully occupied land of Palestine in Middle East after the Nakba (1948). The novel was originally written in Arabic in 2014 and later on translated into English by an Iraqi poet and novelist Sinan Antoon (2019). In her novel, Azem has penned down the apocalyptic vision of a state, where the state deals with its inhabitants on the basis of their religious and ethnic associations. The novel unleashes the story of disappearance of thousands of Palestinian Muslim Arabs since Nakba (1948), through the accounts of a personal red notebook of a Palestinian young man, Alaa. The overnight disappearance is presented as the most terrifying and unreal issue the world has ever seen. Azem has illustrated the story of a settler colonial state where the colonizer’s agenda is to eliminate the indigenous people through a systematic and ongoing erasure of Palestinians. The most important thing to discuss is the question behind logic of elimination of native population presented by the settlers and how the defined target of elimination has been achieved by the Israeli settler forces. The elimination is not only the physical in the form of disappearance of entire Palestinian community, but also the disappearance of the Palestinian narrative that can be seen through the accounts of Alaa’s notebook.

Azem has presented an anti-utopian situation in her novel *The Book of Disappearance* (2014), where the mysterious disappearance of the Palestinians causes social and political unrest among the Israeli public and authorities. Azem has clearly pondered over the issue of marginalization in colonial world where the indigenous people are considered as slaves to serve their colonial masters through grueling jobs to boost their economies. Azem unveils her narrative through two opposite perspectives of an Israeli journalist Ariel and a Palestinian freelance cameraman Alaa, who has penned down his story in a journal addressing his grandmother before his disappearance together with his Muslim community from Jaffa (Tel Aviv, 1909). Alaa addresses his late grandmother in his notebook and narrates the historical events she shared since her childhood from the early days of Israeli settlement. The major concern of the narrative is to elaborate the impacts of settler Zionist project that can be seen through the disappearance of ingenious people and the continuous torture in Israeli prisons that Alaa’s grandmother narrates in her own story. In the beginning they pretend as the disappearance has created unrest among Israelis and they are afraid of being attacked by the Arab world (Azem, 2019). The occupation of Palestinian homes by Israeli neighbors within forty eight hours of the disappearance, indicates that there must be some mystery behind the sudden disappearance. Despite a constant surveillance of security cameras and Israeli police there are no traces of disappearance which indicates that it is a part of Zionist project to replicate Palestinians. As the story unfolds it changes Ariel’s perspective on disappearance and replaces Alaa as a new inhabitant in his home. Azem has explored the idea of historical displacement of Palestinian Muslims from their homes with the replacement of Israeli Jews, which makes her novel a settler colonial text. This paper aims to study how *The Book of Disappearance* (2014), narrates the themes of settler colonialism under the framework of Patrick Wolfe’s settler colonial theory (2006). Moreover, how the settlers achieve their goals through the systematic and political elimination of

colonized as illustrated in the theory developed by Wolfe in his works on settler colonialism will be analyzed.

Literature Review:

The roots of settler colonialism can be traced back to 15th and 16th century with the Portuguese and Spanish colonization in Americas. The settler colonial theory has made its way into social sciences and humanities in early 2000s with the efforts of theorists including Patrick Wolfe and Lorenzo Veracini. Patrick Wolfe in his essay, '*Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native*' (2006) has laid down the foundation of settler colonial theory in humanities. Critics have contemplated settler colonialism as an ongoing process of colonization where the settlers come to stay not only to exploit the resources of indigenous people. The logic of elimination given by the settlers to erase native population which discusses the political philosophy used by the settlers to make their colonial rule uninterrupted is the main concern of the novel. Earlier studies in the late twentieth century on postcolonial issues discuss colonization as a project to exploit rights and resources of the native. Now, in 21st century after the end of colonial era, the colonization is seen as a permanent and ongoing project in most of the cases. In recent times it has been observed that the goal of settler colonialism is to eliminate and replace the indigenous population for the permanence of their colonial projects. In *The Book of Disappearance* (2019) a Palestinian novelist Ibtisam Azem highlighted a similar scenario where the Israeli settlers replace the Palestinian Muslim population with Jewish settlers. Critics have studied Azem's *The Book of Disappearance* (2019) through various lens, like psychic trauma, postcolonial theory, literature of resistance, thematic analysis and Arab science fiction as well.

The novel under consideration has been classified as a postcolonial fiction by most of the critics. For instance, Almalki, S. B. (2024) has explored the novel as Arab Science Fiction to analyze the resistance narrative of Arab Muslim writer against settlers in their presence through physical absence from the land. Almalki, has further analyzed how these fiction narratives dismantle the idea of utopian and sacred Jewish land. Moreover, it illustrates how the Israeli see this sudden disappearance as a miracle to help them achieve their Zionist goal. Mattar (2024) discusses the novel as a colonial text in which the complex relationships of the colonizer with its subjects is the significant issue. Throughout the narrative, Ariel tries to control the narrative of Alaa recorded in his journal entries to replace it with official narratives of the Zionist. Places are haunted by the absence of disappeared people, which Ariel tries to erase from the memories of Alaa` and his grandmother to the names of places in Tel Aviv. Karmim and Rabouj (2022) have studied *The Book of Disappearance* (2019) as an Arab Science Fiction where the binary oppositions work to dominate each other. From its thematic point of view the themes of identity, memory, post-colonialism, disappearance and death are the recurring themes in the novel. The resistance narratives of colonized can be seen in their disappearance and appearance through the lens of magical realism in the novel. They are reclaiming their space in their own homeland through their ASF narrative is the main concern of the study. The narrative of resistance through Alaa's notebook reclaim their physical and narrative space and highlights how political power dynamics work in society. Intisar Rashid Khaleel et al. (2020) has analyzed the novel within the lens of magical realism where the vanishing of the Arab population creates critical situation in which the colonizers are seen in a state of emergency. Such a sudden disappearance can be seen in past when

Alaa's great grandfather was disappear without any trace. The situation becomes tense for the reader when Azem leaves the reason of their disappearance unaddressed.

Yasir & Gaffar (2025) have analyzed the novel as a story of transgenerational trauma where memories and traumatic experiences keep haunting the characters of Alaa and his grandmother. Trauma has been discussed as a painful haunting through history, politics and memory of the characters. Ishaq & Batool (2025) has classified the novel as a postcolonial narrative of resistance against the Zionist narrative of Israeli settlers. The two key concepts (introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) deterritorialization and reterritorialization, which highlight the colonial fantasy in the novel. The colonizers try to eliminate and erase the presence of the indigenous people through cartography, renaming the places, changing the maps and controlled media campaigns can be seen throughout the novel. The absence of Palestinians is seen as a denial rather than the historical violence by the settlers. Tonia Harris (2021) in her review states the novel as a memory of the Nakba (catastrophe of 1948) generations shared by the later generations in Alaa's journal. It challenges the Israeli military control of space and security in the country. It further illustrates the impact of their physical disappearance on Israeli business and other day to day services. Ariel is one of them who is waiting for the Palestinians to reveal their response. Azem has successfully blurred and dismantled the borders through the mystery of disappearance of the Palestinians from Palestine/Israel. Azem (2019) states that Ariel after the sudden disappearance starts living in Alaa's private apartment which shows occupation of space that can be seen throughout the novel in the form of Alaa's journal entries. Farah (2021) their review has foregrounded various myths like "liberal Zionism" where they rename the places, use their houses after the vanishing act of Palestinians and Azem has converted this settler project into moral blindness of the settlers. Sheerit (2020) has discussed the novel as dystopian fantasy that never resolves. The different focalization perspectives of two different characters determine the structure and characters of the novel. The chapters narrate the story of Alaa in his journal entries are in first person narration whereas the remaining chapters clearly defines what Ariel reads, hears and think about the disappearance. The shift in focalization and narrative perspectives is seen in Ariel's translation of Alaa's journal from Arabic to Hebrew to publish it as his own work along with his entry into Alaa's apartment without his permission. Wolfe's categorical claim on settler colonialism as structure and colonizer's logic to eliminate the indigenous communities from their land can be explored throughout the novel.

Research Questions:

The research aims to answer the following questions through qualitative research.

1. How does Ibtisam Azem depict the settler colonial project and its failure through sudden disappearance of Palestinians in her novel *The Book of Disappearance*?
2. How does the politics of the sovereign work to exploit the colonizers?
3. How does the settler group see and respond to the disappearance?

Theoretical Framework:

The study is conducted by using the qualitative research approach in which settler colonial theory, developed by an Australian historian and author Patrick Wolfe (2006) has been incorporated. The settler colonial theory explains how the settlers use their power as a mean to eliminate the indigenous populations from their homeland unlike other forms of colonization where the core

purpose of the colonizer is to extract resources from the colonized land, says Wolfe (2006). Wolfe (2006) defines how settler colonialism is a different form of colonialism, which is a structured and ongoing process, unlike other forms of imperialism where the financial exploitation is the primary goal of colonizer. Wolfe's theory introduces a new perspective in colonial studies by integrating the concept of permanence in colonial projects. The sudden disappearance of Palestinian and the story of Alaa's ancestors highlights the erasure and elimination of the natives. In *The Book of Disappearance* (2014) the mysterious disappearance of a large population and the history of refugee camps after the Nakba (1948) and the death cells for torture are the illustrations of politics of the colonial powers. *The Book of Disappearance* (2014) as a critique of Zionist project of Israel and the physical and ideological elimination of Arabs from their homeland are discussed with reference to the idea of Wolfe given in his settler colonial theory.

The Book of Disappearance: A Critique of Settler Colonialism

The world has witnessed a prolonged history of colonization from 15th century Portuguese colonies to 20th century British colonization all over the world, and the struggle for independence by the colonized people. In 21st century Middle East in Asia is the only part of the world where the native communities are treated as colonial subjects. Ibtisam Azem's novel *The Book of Disappearance* (2014) narrates the story of settler colonialism in Palestine/Israel, an idea introduced by Patrick Wolfe in his seminal work *Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native* (2006). Azem's narrative has been narrated in the form of journal entries that was left behind by the native Palestinian a freelance cameraman Alaa, after the sudden disappearance of Arab population. Throughout her novel, Azem has highlighted the theme of colonization and the agenda behind the Zionist project of Israel since the Nakba (1948). There are several examples of settler colonialism that can be seen in Africa and Australia in 21st century. It has the most violent form of colonization in Palestine, the world has ever experience, where the ethnic cleansing of the indigenous population has become the core objective of the settlers. Azem has criticized the systematic erasure of Palestinians from their homeland and the logic given by the settlers through their power politics to eliminate the natives.

1. Settler Colonialism is a Structure not an Event

People have seen colonial projects all over the world along with their exploitation of indigenous communities. Most of the colonies got their independence from colonizers in late 20th century and colonizers were primarily concerned with the extraction of economic and natural resources from their colonies. In her novel *The Book of Disappearance* (2019), Azem criticizes the Zionist project of Israel in her country through its narrative as an ongoing process unlike other forms of colonization. Settler colonialism is defined as an ongoing structure not an event that has been going on since the Nakba (1948). The settlers started their colonial project in 1948 with the aim of replacement of the native from their land which is still going on. Azem (2019) states that Yusif, a bus driver, who appeared through the stories of Alaa's grandmother in the novel, once had a plan to open his own restaurant in Jaffa along with his friend David, disappeared suddenly and never appeared again. The settlers started their colonial project in 1948 with the aim of replacement of the native from their land which is still going on after 77 years of the Nakba. In contemporary Palestine they face the same incident of disappearance as a structural part of the Nakba (1948), when thousands of Palestinians lost their homes and leaves their homeland in the novel without any traces behind. Patrick Wolfe the founding figure in settler colonial theory has defined this kind

of colonization as a distinct form. According to Wolfe (1999) permanence is the core feature of colonizers and they invade a piece of land in a structured and systematic way. Permanent settlement and erasure of the indigenous population are the core features of settler colonialism from Australia to Asia.

More than 70 years of continuous and forceful disappearance of Palestinians, validates Azem's stance of Israel as a settler colonial state. Thousands of Palestinians have been kidnaped, forcefully thrown to refugee camps and disappeared since 1948, after the declaration of Jewish settlement in Middle East. Azem (2019) has stated that the Muslim Arab residents of different Israeli/Palestinian cities like Gaza, Judea and Samaria disappeared without any traces behind. The Israeli settlers not only forced the natives to leave their homes but they have changed the names of their towns, streets and places to extinguish their culture and social identity. Azem (2019) narrates that they have changed the names of places and streets to remind them that previously they living in prisons. They have occupied their homes and force them to live in refugee camps with insufficient necessities of life. The struggle for Tel Aviv as a substitute white Middle Eastern city for Jaffa is another attempt to erase their indigenous identity. There are some reports elaborating the statistical data of Palestinians, who were forced to leave their homes in first two years of the settlement and the numbers are highly alarming. Flapan (1987) has claimed in first two years of Jewish settlement in Middle East around 700,000 have been evicted from areas allocated for the Jewish settlement. In the early years of the Jewish settlement, the Arabs were forcefully thrown to the West Bank and Gaza leaving their homes and wealth behind. They have occupied Arab cities and towns along with the allocated areas to uproot them from the holy land.

2. Physical Erasure of Palestinians and Settlers' Logic of Elimination

The founding father of Zionist movement, an Austro-Hungarian Jewish journalist, Theodor Herzl in his pamphlet *The Jewish state* (originally titled *Der Judenstaat*, 1896) has illustrated his ideology of Zionism for their future Jewish state. Herzl (1946/1896) wrote that if he has a wish to construct a new building then it is essential to demolish the old one to maintain the natural sequence. Exclusion of Arab population from Middle East seems natural to the Zionists. To legalize their existence in the land they have to exterminate the natives. The elimination of the natives can change the world view towards the issue. The physical erasure is the key concern of the settlers to replace the native for their permanent settlements in Middle East. Settlers believe that the Arabs were previously living in terrible conditions and now they are working for their welfare through renaming the places, providing jobs and democratic environment. They have their own logic for renaming/elimination that Azem has narrated. Azem (2019) states when the Zionist arrived they slaughtered Arabs, kicked them out and took control of everything. Since 1948, thousands of Palestinians have been killed and disappeared without any traces behind. Azem sheds light on the issue through her novel that has been ignored by the western world. Mark LeVine in his book *Overthrowing Geography* has explained the logic given by the settlers for the erasure of natives and their cities in order to form their own identity in Middle East. LeVine (2005) is of the view that for Jews Jaffa must be empty from its Arab dwellers and their past to able to become a typical Middle Eastern city. It was a dream of their founding father Theodor Herzl to demolish the old to construct a new. So it is essential for them to eradicate Palestinians from their homeland in order to establish a new state of Israel.

Territoriality has always been the major concern for the settler colonialism unlike other forms of colonization where the extraction of colonial resources is the core business of colonizers. Patrick Wolfe in his theoretical works on settler colonialism has clearly explained their agenda. Wolfe (2006) states that the settler only requires elimination of the natives from their land but not in a specific manner. In the beginning of the disappearance of Palestinians, Israelis are seen quite suspicious and concerned but as the novel progresses they start taking control of their homes. In *'Necropolitics'* Mbembe (2003) illustrates that for the settlers, the existence of 'Other' is a threat to their lives and its solution is in practical elimination of natives. To take control of their land without any threat to life and security from natives is crucial. The physical existence of natives is a potential threat for the settlers to establish their Zionist project on holy land. They have killed thousands of Palestinians in last seven decades to erase the identity of the natives. Spagat et al. (2026) in their survey conducted in Gaza and West bank in Palestine between October 2023, and January 2025, estimated more than 75000 thousand deaths. 56% of total casualties are women and children totaling 42200 deaths just in sixteen months. The high death rate in Gaza and other Muslim areas highlights the intensity of the settler's Zionist project in Middle East for Israel. Azem (2019) states that Ariel starts believing that the Arabs have gone from the country by their own will and they should enjoy their lives in a new state instead of investigation of the issue as a journalist. This is how Israeli journalist shows his concern for the disappeared Arabs, as a substitute of reaching at some logical solution of the situation.

3. Goal of the Settler: Acquisition of the Palestinian Land

Primarily, settlers came with the aim of a new homeland for the Jews after the declaration of Belfour Declaration in 1917. UN passed a resolution in 1947 for two state solution in Middle East, but with the passage of time Zionist forces started their project with the occupation of Palestinian areas by eliminating them. Wolfe (2006) in his essay, *'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native'* has illustrated that the key motive of the settler is access to the land but not the elimination of civilization, ethnicity and religion from the land. Azem throughout her novel criticizes the notion of elimination of indigenous communities because of their association with the land. It can be seen in the relationship of Alaa and Ariel in the novel. In the beginning Ariel was concerned for the sudden disappearance of Alaa but as the time passes it becomes clear for the readers that the settlers are only concerned with their land. Azem (2019) writes that Ariel occupies Alaa's home and takes a small bag to put whatever he needs to start living there. Through the complex relationship of Alaa and Ariel, the narrative unleashes the hypocrisy of settlers irrespective of the disappearance of millions of people who use to be the friends and neighbors of Israeli Jews. Initially the Jewish settlement was a temporary project in Middle East with the aim to provide them a separate piece of land for permanent settlement. A piece of land is crucial to establish a separate and independent Jewish state to protect their lives from Nazis and other anti-Semitic powers. After the sudden disappearance of Palestinians there is a social and political unrest among Jewish community because of the untraceable effect of the vanishing act. Israeli Defense Forces are not taking the responsibility of the incident and the government has issued an ultimatum of 48 hours for the citizens to report to the authorities and register as Israeli citizen. Some groups enjoy their disappearance and have been planning to take advantage of the situation to occupy their home as a sacred duty. Azem (2019) formulates that Israelis believe that it is their religious duty to enter into their houses for prayer and make them clean. They have shown no concern for their friends, neighbors, drivers and factory workers despite facing serious issue of labor shortage all

over the country. Wolfe (2006) says that settlers need practical erasure of indigenous people to establish itself on their land. The settler needs physical elimination of the native to make their failure into success.

Conclusion

The comparative scholarship fosters understanding of settler colonialism and Azem in *The Book of Disappearance* has exposed it through her narrative. It is essential for the reader to understand the settler colonial project in Middle East. The settler project is struggling to exclude the natives from the land. The policy of permanent erasure of the Palestinians from their homeland and the logic for their elimination has fractured their claim. The continuous violence, disappearance and lawlessness in the land is visible through their treatment of the natives. The struggle to eliminate is a structure that started in 1948 with the establishment of Israel and after more than seven decades the project is seen as failure of the colonial project in Palestine.

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