

'Changed Landscape' of an 'Arab Place:' A Study of an Interpellated Realm in Karmi's *Return*

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ABSTRACT *As the episodes of forced evictions in the environs of Jerusalem gain momentum even amidst a global pandemic at the dawn of the third decade of the twenty-first century, this paper studies the individual narrative of an anglicized Arab woman, Ghada Karmi, who was forced to leave the place of her birth and childhood more than eighty-three years ago. Engaging Althusser's theory of ideology and interpellation, this paper examines this recurring pattern of brutal practice as an environmental ethical concern. By stating the postcolonial environmental ethic of her homeland through her latest memoir, Karmi questions unexamined idées reçues,¹ preexisting units of information, that impede the process of any solution for the Palestinian predicament. Understanding the need for social justice and decolonization, as manifested in Karmi's memoir, this conceptual paper investigates how she presents her right to return to the land of her birth, how she problematizes the ongoing marginalization, erasure, and Nakba of her land, both by external as well as internal factors, and how she states the environmental ethic of her place.*

Keywords: Sheikh Jarrah, Jerusalem, Environmental Ethics, *Idées Reçues*, Ongoing Nakba

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Background of the Selected Text: Its Socio-Political Importance

We have about 50 percent of the world's wealth, but only 6.3 percent of its population [...] In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity.²

World peace has been threatened with the recent incidents at Sheikh Jarrah, in the surroundings of Jerusalem. However, a British Palestinian Doctor of Medicine and daughter of a famous linguist and BBC broadcaster, Ghada Karmi, born in Jerusalem in 1939, records a similar experience of forced eviction in her 2002 memoir, *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story*. Karmi being a writer, academic, and lecturer at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, writes prolifically for newspapers and magazines, including *The Guardian*, *The Nation*, and the *Journal of Palestinian Studies*. Critics like Said view this story of exile and displacement as a poignant, remarkable, and well-written text about the personal and communal life in mandatory Palestine, which brings out her skill and insight, and “intermesh...the political and the personal.”³ Her second book, *Married to Another Man: Israel's Dilemma in Palestine* (2007) is a critical work of great enterprise and importance, highlighting the political and historical drama transpiring in the story of the plight of Palestinians.

The selected text for this study, *Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (2015) is a memoir, a documentary source to show ramifications to the Palestinian side of what happened in 1948. Historians like Ilan Pappé, find *Return* as a “journey into the heart of occupation's darkness;”⁴ and I find this book as a synthesis and *dénouement* of thoughts of a mature woman who, not only has witnessed the devastating events of 1948 but has been living and breathing the issue of Palestine.

Many other writers have raised similar concerns through their memoirs and narratives.⁵ Salman Abu Sitta, though spared the intensity of brutalities of the Palestinian Nakba himself, is a distinguished historian who discusses the issue of return from the perspective of a Palestinian refugee in his book, *Mapping My Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (2016). Belonging to an old influential family in Beersheba, Sitta wants to return to his home and wants to understand the “hatred” that brought this century-old refugee status for many Palestinians like him around the world. Similarly, memoirs of Amira Haas, *Drinking the Sea at Gaza: Days and Nights in a Land Under Siege* (1999), Miko Peled, *The General's Son: Journey of an Israeli in Palestine* (2012), and Reja e Busailah's *In the Land of My Birth: A Palestinian Boyhood* (2017) discuss the atrocities befalling Palestinian land and society from different perspectives. Therefore, the issue of return, the Palestinian dilemma, and the Jewish question are some of the leading arguments of the Palestinian issue. Addressing these main questions,

Karmi's narrative shows how Palestine is undergoing an ongoing *Nakba*, because of it being treated as a 'friendless orphan,'⁶ and states an environmental ethic for the land of her birth.

Karmi, with her hybrid existence as a British-Palestinian, writes *Return* as a journey of an 'outsider insider,' who is 'not Arab enough' in Palestine, but 'too Arab in England.'⁷ With this hybridity of a westernized

Palestinian identity and appointed by United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to work as a consultant in the Ministry of Media and Communications for the Palestinian Authority (PA), Karmi brings out an understanding of how the work in the ministry is an extension of the impacted Palestinian life under the Israeli occupation. By giving an in-depth insight into the workings of these PA ministries with her keen observations on their internal dynamics, she shows through her memoir the double marginalization of Palestinians in the twenty-first century and states the environmental ethic of her place.

Environmental ethic, a major theoretical lens used in this study, is a term defined by Deane Curtin as a postcolonial concern of a place that accounts for environmental justice, social justice, and economic justice as parts of the same whole, not as dissonant competitors. In other words, environmental ethics check the blanket assertions of environmentalism, by foregrounding the ethical rationale of the existence of a place with its historical manifestations and exposing the ideological and interpellative strategies of the occupying forces. Environmental ethic, therefore, supports measures for decolonization or environmental resistance movements so that social justice, peace, and stability of a region may prevail. Consequently, postcolonial environmental ethic is an ethic of resistance or eco-postcolonial justice defined as one of the many "indigenous environmental resistance movements that are emerging around the globe."⁸ While, interpellation is a process of accepting and internalizing the cultural values as they are presented to us without much choice left, but to accept. The primary reason for acceptance and internalization is the governing ideology which basically manipulates everyday individual and collective decisions.

The following discussion shows how any concerns and efforts for seeking peace, reconciliation, or justice in Palestine have been disregarded because of the social, economic, legal, political, and consequently, environmental injustices meted out towards this land and its people. While its leadership, or its lack thereof (if we may say so) which led to strategic profligacy, is also exposed by Karmi's memoir. By stating a postcolonial environmental ethic of Palestine,

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Three times in nearly four decades, Ghada Karmi (L) and Ellen Siegel (R) have stood outside an Israeli embassy, holding identical signs telling the world of their respective dispossession and privilege. London in 1973 (LHS) and 1992 and Washington, D.C. on October 25, 2011. (RHS)

Karmi’s narrative brings forth the need to resist all kinds of injustices mentioned above to attain any meaningful peace and reconciliation in this realm.

The Cataclysm of Homecoming: A Return of ‘Crestfallen’ Flotsam and Jetsam¹⁹

For Karmi, *Return: A Palestinian Memoir* is an ‘emotional and intellectual gauntlet,’ which makes a reader experience the appropriation of Palestinian land and culture through Karmi’s visit in 2005, to the place of her birth and childhood. After her first visit to Palestine in 1991, she had promised to herself never to return to “this torn-up, unhappy place” because she could see the Palestinian society interpellated¹⁰ to live a life under occupation. Nonetheless, she comes several times after her first visit, as if she is dithering drawn to its devastated landscape.

Arriving in Ramallah, this time, to work as an official of the UNDP, she describes the painful journey of acknowledging her appropriated Palestine and seeing the “triumph of those who had taken our place.”¹¹ Gemzo Suites, the place she has to stay, “stands in place of ‘Jimzu,...a village East of the town of al-Ramallah in pre-1948 Palestine.” The village was “built on a hillside and surrounded by cactus plants and olive trees, before it was demolished in September 1948 by Palestine’s new owners,”¹² as Karmi tells us. The manifestation of this appropriation of land, culture, and resources is a motif that is discussed in various forms in her memoir. Through her text, a reader can envisage the erasure of Palestinian identity.

Working as a consultant for the Ministry of Media and Communications, to devise effective media strategies for the cause of Palestine, Karmi gets an acute understanding of the working of different ministries and the interpellated reality of her fellow Palestinians with almost no choice but to seemingly work for

the Palestinian cause. These ministries, with their added internal rivalries, are a typical example of Bhabha's term of a "comprador class."¹³ Through her narrative, Karmi tells us, how in a typical colonial fashion, this class is cultivated and given privileges and are led to believe that they are doing some real task, that these are actual ministries, and they are performing some genuine work, but it is a surreal world. Though living in the diaspora, but because of her being extremely dedicated to the Palestinian cause, Karmi makes her reader aware of how the different Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) are given aid by the European Union, to let the people in this small world live in a pseudo-reality of convening conferences and envisaging a future of building infrastructures.

Karmi sees the brutal manifestations of oppression and colonization that are continuing unabated, in the places supposedly under PA control, a bitter contrast to this make-believe world, literally littered with NGOs

However, she shows, how the EU and other foreign powers, "a garden variety bigotry," are complicit in creating this make-believe world, and therefore, "U.S. policy, and the seemingly unconnected question of Palestine" are quite intertwined.¹⁴ This world, ostensibly, makes the people busy in important vocations of arranging literary and art festivals, but, in reality, are a means of making them compete with each other in a vicious cycle of securing coveted foreign funding. Consequently, this place becomes what Nadia Abu El-Haj contextualizes as 'Assumed Nations'¹⁵ in her book, *Facts on the Ground: Archeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israel Society* (2001). Karmi sees the brutal manifestations of oppression and colonization that are continuing unabated, in the places supposedly under PA control, a bitter contrast to this make-believe world, literally littered with NGOs. She exposes the farce of this bizarre world in which these NGOs and so-called ministries, are allowed to engage in activities that do not threaten the status quo of ongoing appropriation, marginalization, and erasure of the Palestinians. She sees this as a threat to the environmental ethic of her land, manifesting as a self-perpetuating system, creating quasi-normality, while the restraints at the horrendous checkpoints tell a different story. She does not spare the genomic politics of PA and political persons like the compromising figure of Mahmood Abbas who appears towards the end of her memoir or the ministers organizing the conference. The reader witnesses the cutting questions and comments of an Israeli journalist, Amira Haas, that she puts to Dr. Farid, the minister arranging one such conference.

Haas' book, *Drinking the Sea at Gaza: Days and Nights in a Land Under Siege* (1999) is a memoir concerned with the time period of Haas's life when she starts living in Gaza to understand this microcosm. It is a detailed account

According to Karmi, there is “a well-known but little-publicized prejudice among Ashkenazi Jews in Israel against Arab or oriental Jews, which led to a variety of attitudes and practices that discriminated against them”

of the life and plight of Gazan’s through the pen of a Jewish reporter who chooses to live among her brethren in humanity and to tell the truth about them with her experiences. Haas, Peled, Finkelstein, Massad, and many others quoted in this paper are some examples of organic intellectuals, to use Said’s term, who choose to speak truth to the power.

Questioning the marginalization that Karmi experiences herself, she makes this questioning a part of a larger inquiry. The visa that is denied to a British passport holder like herself who is going for work under the United Nations office, makes her aware of the hurdles a normal Palestinian may be facing. At the Israeli consulate in London, with the “phalanx of policemen and a closed iron gate,” she is told that she would be collecting her visa on arrival since the computers are down and no “technician from Israel” has yet arrived to fix the problem. Her subtle question implicit in her remark, that probably due to “security’ reasons, no computer expert from London would have been allowed to do the job,”¹⁶ makes her reader aware of what may possibly follow.

Besides her own marginalization, she shows the marginalization within different Jewish communities and the hierarchal orders with her observation about the superiority of one immigration officer over another at the immigration counter. Even after giving satisfactory answers to the routine questions of the young immigration officer, Karmi is asked to wait, and is visited by another European-looking, a blond Ashkenazi immigration officer, who seems to be the young officer’s “superior on those grounds alone.” According to Karmi, there is “a well-known but little-publicized prejudice among Ashkenazi Jews in Israel against Arab or oriental Jews, which led to a variety of attitudes and practices that discriminated against them.”¹⁷ Many critics¹⁸ have brought out this unique hierarchal marginalization of the eastern, Arab, or African Jews in comparison to the Ashkenazi Jews, when the latter are given preference in almost everything, even in the rights of increasing their progeny.

Karmi seems to belong to the generation of Palestinian diaspora who may have lived in their “adopted countr[ies],” for half a century or so but have a strong “desire to belong” to their homeland. It is this longing that makes her declare that she is “a full-time Palestinian” despite her medical profession. She has “never got used to this exercise of Israeli control over what was not Israel’s to police at all.” She cannot bring herself to terms with “Israel’s increasing self-confidence in its occupation of Palestinian land,” and is extremely wary

of the “unpredictability of Israeli behavior.”¹⁹ Karmi’s narrative and her lectures and other writings,²⁰ along with many other Palestinian and even Israeli writers²¹ is a straightforward negation of this claim of Golda Meir, 4th Prime Minister of Israel from 1969-1974, that, “There was no such thing as a Palestinian people...It was not as though there was a Palestinian people considering themselves as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist.”²² Karmi’s life in England, therefore, pivots around working for promoting the cause of Palestinians.

However, it is with a sheer sense of loss that she observes the sully of, the once, powerful Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). With its charismatic leader, Yasser Arafat, in the PLO’s heydays of the 1960s, it was an organization formed in exile and functioning as “virtual government-in-exile, with a parliament in the shape of the Palestinian National Council (PNC).”²³ Karmi also acutely observes that after Yasser Arafat’s 1974 address in the UN General Assembly, there begins the corruption of PLO representatives, when they, “acting as quasi-ambassadors, were appointed to most world capitals,”²⁴ and the imperfections of this organization began to manifest itself in their different policies.

It is important to note that not only is Karmi critical of the occupation of Palestinian land by Israeli settler colonialism but also describes the strategic marginalization and eventual erasure of the political representations such as the PLO. However, she does not let these pseudo-Palestinian representative organizations go scot-free for playing straight into the hands of the strategic maneuvers of its supposed enemy and takes issues with the quasi ambience that the PLO provided to all its activists like her. She explains how she feels left out and “a kind of second-hand Palestinian, an armchair windbag,” after the historic return of Yasser Arafat and the rest of the leadership to the ‘Palestinian soil’ after ‘forty years of exile,’ as a result of Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinians in 1993, which was much ‘trumpeted as a triumph.’²⁵ She hardly sees this as a victory, because it leaves out a big majority of Palestinians, like herself, working from their exiled positions. Consequently, this also leaves the refugee camps in a vulnerable position when PLO leaves the provided protection.

These refugee camps, which were supposedly “safe places under international law” but “had been a target for Israeli military operations from 1950 onwards” and “also subject to in-fighting among groups with different political affiliations”²⁶ lost the armed PLO protection in 1982. The fighters were withdrawn and forced into exile in the wake of the Israeli siege of Beirut and the consequence was the massacre at the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in September 1982, with nearly 2000 people, mostly old men, women, and children “massacred in a killing spree lasting two days.”²⁷ Therefore, Karmi does not

see PA's moving into and operating from within Palestine, as any victory. She is also critical of the "serious mistakes" committed by the PLO with its mostly disunited strategies, resulting in its final capitulation witnessed by the world. As Rashid Khalidi puts it in his boldly titled book, *Brokers of Deceit: How the US Has Undermined the Peace in the Middle East* (2013): "'The East is a career,' said Benjamin Disraeli: what was true of the East in the heyday of the British Empire has become true of the so-called 'peace-process' at the apogee of the era of American global dominance."²⁸

This may be seen as a double marginalization of the Palestinian people and their land. It is not only the old colonial and imperial strategy of divide and rule, as we witness, but also imports the need for a self-critical questioning as many scholars argue,²⁹ about the Palestinian leadership that has been abysmal, and made grave mistakes. On the other hand, the sad demise of Palestinian political leadership is also a manifestation of a phenomenon, what Australian commentator, A.A. Philips has defined as 'a cultural cringe' for societies under settler-colonialism because of their not being liberated from "their nominal political independence."³⁰ This nominal political independence is what Karmi critiques from many aspects, when she goes back to Palestine in 2005, to work for the ministries of the Palestinian Authority.

Karmi's decision to go back to Palestine, not as one of the hosts of "marginal researchers [and] foreign experts," but to see the inner workings of the PA which serves as the de facto representation of the Palestinian people, gives her an in-depth understanding about the situation in Palestine. Located with its offices and ministries at Ramallah, a "landlocked place six miles North of Jerusalem with a population of about 300,000 people [and] a popular summer resort for the well-to-do Palestinians" before 1948, is when she is able to see the "quasi-official status" of this age-old city. It is after coming and working in one or two of the ministries that she can read the inscription on the wall that her land is appropriated in the full sense of the word and occupied—quite doubly so. She witnesses the appropriated city, "distorted by four decades of military occupation." She tells us that the whole character of this 'Palestinian place' is appropriated in terms of its food, customs, and traditions by confiscating "much of their lands and livelihoods." Even the traditional Arab dishes like hummus and falafel, are now being called 'Israeli.' Witnessing this double marginalization, she makes the reader aware of the interpellated reality of her place when she asks this question: "Where else in the world would such a government-within-a-government exist, operating as if it were sovereign over its own lands, while in reality subservient to someone else in every sense?"³¹ She finds this anomaly quite depressing.

This double marginalization also manifests on the shelves of the normal grocery stores, owned by small Palestinian businessmen, which are an "easy source

of livelihood...[for those]..whose economic situation did not allow for many other forms of work.” But it is the “profusion of Israeli goods on the shelves, almost all labeled in Hebrew and usually no other language,”³² that strikes her as another kind of appropriation. It can also be seen as the manifestation of Ideological State Apparatuses using Repressive State Apparatuses, in Althusserian terminology, when the ideology is working behind the repression, working its way to the minutest details of human existence in Palestine. While on a bigger level, this repression, when “the break-up of the PA, with Gaza, split off under Hamas and the West Bank under Fateh” further interpellates the Palestinians into splitting their identities. These are the interpolations on a grander scale, both at the hands of the occupiers as well as the impacted people working in the ministries, for whom, “the Israeli occupation had been there for all their lives.”³³ The colonial powers have always worked for the disintegration of the colonized. It is the identification of the comprador class within the colonized that makes Karmi feel crestfallen in the land of her return.

Karmi makes the discussion of this ‘circus’ as she calls the ministry businesses in the PA, as one of the main arguments of her memoir along with the discussion of the occupation of Israel on Palestine

The European Jews, who were suggested to be ‘drained’ elsewhere, by their spiritual mentor, Herzl back in 1903 are discussed in an article, “The Aliens Bill and Jewish Immigration to Britain 1902-1905” by Oskar K. Rabinowicz, in Walid Khalidi’s book, *From Haven to Conquest* (1971). Rabinowicz discusses the problem of Jewish migration from Russia and Romania due to their persecution in Eastern Europe in the early 1880s. He discusses how there was a talk of a bill to be passed declaring Jews as alien. Earlier, Walid Khalidi also quotes Lord Balfour’s declaration in defense of this alien bill. Khalidi writes:

Defending the Bill in 1905 Prime Minister Balfour had unburdened himself as follows: “...a state of things could be easily imagined in which it would not be to the advantage of the civilization of this country that there should be an immense body of persons who, however patriotic, able and industrious, however much they threw themselves into national life, still, by their own action, remained a people apart, and not merely held a religion differing from the vast majority of their fellow-countrymen, but only inter-married among themselves.”³⁴

With this background in mind, the context of Rabinowicz’s article becomes clear when he quotes Herzl: “If you allow me to say so, Mr. Chamberlain, I should prefer for England’s glory that you do not make such a Bill. Drain them elsewhere, but don’t make an Alien Bill.”³⁵

Karmi is implicitly critiquing the Jewish myths championing that this land should be only inhabited by the Jews with their tall claims, for the last century or so, as, Said also argues how Jerusalem was converted from a “multi-cultural and multi-religious city into a principally Jewish one”

The impacted landscape of her surroundings that she encounters in her everyday walk to her office is the culminating point of more than a century-old solution for the persecuted Jews. Karmi’s observation of her place, where even the traffic lights are called “ramzone” by their Hebrew name; where she could see the settlements set up on “part of someone’s farmland,” or “Ramallah’s agricultural land [which] hemmed in the town on all sides, making its expansion impossible;” or “the giant settlements high up on the hills,

their houses cascading down towards the town’s outskirts,” is what brings her face to face with the grim Palestinian reality. This scene is followed by her description of a long list of the ministries of the Palestinian Authority with their white buildings lined up one after the other, the Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Sports,³⁶ and the list goes on. Thus, if Kashmir is subjected to a re-colonization by a former colonized, and now a decolonized power of India,³⁷ double colonization is what we see in Palestine, through Karmi’s writing. One is the Jewish settler colonialism and the other is the interpellated reality of the Palestinian Authority, which is supposed to be safeguarding the rights of the Palestinians but have their hands tied behind their backs.

Karmi makes the discussion of this ‘circus’ as she calls the ministry businesses in the PA, as one of the main arguments of her memoir along with the discussion of the occupation of Israel on Palestine. It is also because Palestine is one part of the larger scheme of colonial-imperialism that is manifest in many regions of the Middle East. It is a region, which is repeatedly been occupied, destroyed, and reinstated by puppet regimes before, and after the Arab Spring, with the most devastating outcomes as many historians argue.³⁸ The description of the internal minuscule life of the ministry completes the grim picture of a subaltern existence. It is a place where some like Esperance and Dr. Sabah act as the ‘comprador class,’ with “Esperance’s cold eye” on Karmi, who “could not divine the reason for her hostility,”³⁹ while the other people working at the ministry were supposed to have “other duties,” and as Karmi is told, would not be able to talk to her for long.⁴⁰ As a passing critique, Karmi brings out the significance of Esperance’s name, which as she tells us, is an old name like Violette, Clemence, or Marie, which is “still used among Catholic Palestinians.”⁴¹ Karmi is implicitly critiquing the Jewish myths championing that this land should be only inhabited by the Jews with their tall claims, for



the last century or so, as, Said also argues how Jerusalem was converted from a “multi-cultural and multi-religious city into a principally Jewish one.”⁴² When she turns to the task at hand, namely; to “work on a new media strategy that deals with the way we present the facts to the Western media, and also the Israeli media,” she is cut short by the handing out of a “well-thumbed” ten-page document in Arabic, entitled, “The Plan for Communication to the Media on the Palestinian Cause.”⁴³

Besides this obvious manifestation of a pseudo existence of a ‘Palestinian Authority,’ where nothing worthwhile can be implemented, Karmi mentioning something as a passing reference may mean a lot more if we pause and reflect over it. She writes that just like a typical Arab office life, in which a lot of rounds of coffee and tête-à-tête is a routine, one man used to come “into the ministry every morning, scanned the internet for press articles he was interested in, and after a coffee and a chat, went home again. No one took any notice.”⁴⁴ The fact that no one took any notice of this man, tells us two things. First, that the staff did not have the shrewd insight to probe deeper, and second, even if any of them had the capacity to decipher the purpose of his visits, s/he would not have the nerve to get his/her nose out of the interpretatively limited scope of the menial tasks assigned to him/her and put his/her subsistence providing job in jeopardy. ‘This visitation’ also reminds us of the concept of Michel Foucault’s concept of panopticism, where everything is monitored and is under surveillance. Juxtaposing this episode of this man’s visits, with the episode when Karmi was not handed over her visa in the Israeli Consulate in

Almost a hundred people gathered to protest against Israel’s occupation, illegal settlement policies, and deportation of Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in East Jerusalem on February 25, 2022.

MUSTAFA
ALKHAROUF / AA

London (mentioned above), only because there had been no computer technician flown in from Israel, brings out the grave irony of the situation. Here are a people whose land, life, property, and everything are under occupation, and they cannot, or would not pay attention to a stranger in a government office of Palestinian Authority, while no computer expert in London could have been trusted to fix the consulate's computer problem because of security reasons. This is a sadly ironic situation, indeed!

Karmi soon states the bitter realization that with the given dynamics of the workings of the ministry, she stands nowhere near her initial incentive of coming to Palestine and working for the Palestinian cause from within. She is warned about this on the first day of her arrival when she, by chance, walks into a Danish woman, Annetta, who is now working on a project funded by the Japanese government. Annetta, "who had become an indispensable guide to life in Ramallah,"⁴⁵ tells Karmi that she had also worked at the ministry but had given up after a year because she was always considered an outsider. Though she thinks that, perhaps, it would be better for Karmi because at least she is Palestinian and knows the language and may be accepted in a better way. Karmi's situation was hardly different from Annetta however since she is avoided and is considered an impediment, in the otherwise peaceful workings (read interpellated into their banal routines) of the ministry.

To better understand the situation, she starts making positive use of her time in Palestine by connecting to the world outside the ministry. This comes out to be a knowledgeable experience from close proximity in terms of Karmi's experiencing the colonization of Palestine in the twenty-first century. She can make connections between the impacted world outside and the microcosmic life of the ministry.

Truncated Villages, Walled Silence: A Case of Protest at the Wall of Abu Dis

The role of the PA, as the only realistic path to Palestinian independence, has been challenged by many recent scholars of the present century. Philip Leech studies the PA phenomenon in his book, *The State of Palestine: A Critical Analysis* (2017). Besides critically analyzing the workings of the PA and its subsequent failures, Leech is also critical of "Europe's own bellicose and combustible past" being translated as the only authentic reality and considers it as Europe's "seriously blinkered logic."⁴⁶ Likewise, Karmi, through her lived-in narrative, subverts the pervasive Western support and promotion of the PA as the effective representative body for Palestinian rights. Her text can be seen as demanding a manifestation of Nixon's words in his article "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism," when he says, "we can aspire to a more historically

answerable and geographically expansive sense of what constitutes our environment and which literary works we entrust to voice its parameters.⁴⁷ By exposing the workings of the Ministry of Media and Communications Karmi's literary memoir seems to be saying that the subalterns of the twenty-first century are quite a depressing reality and that too in the offices of the PA.

We see the evasive answers of two of her colleagues, Thabit and his wife, who also work at the ministry. While offering a lift to "Doctora," as they call Karmi, they "would not be drawn out," as she writes, and tell her that they "are not unhappy there. It was a job, and they did not interfere in what went around them."⁴⁸ The subtext of this comment tells us what they could not bring to their lips.

However, it is in a typical subaltern manner that they convey facts about their village to Karmi. They tell her that the inhabitants of their large village of around 20,000 people of Beitunia are making do with what was left to them of this "wonderful place of rich agriculture and ample land." That two-thirds of this land was taken away by Israel two years earlier, when it "built its separation wall" and took the "village land, leaving them to manage on what was left." This reminds Karmi of reading about "Beitunia's fierce demonstrations against the wall, against the settlements, and in solidarity with the Palestinian prisoners in Israel's jails." These demonstrations and protests, which the people of this village carry out against the siege of Gaza also, are rewarded with the usual Repressive State Apparatuses of colonial hegemony of "Israeli army's tear gas and 'rubber bullets,'" which are "no less lethal" as they are "live ammunition, in reality, encased in a rubber coating,"⁴⁹ as Karmi notes.

The fact that these settlements and 'apartheid' walls are built in the area, supposedly under the jurisdiction of the PA, and are illegal in status, carries double implications. That the PA is not/ could not/ or would not do anything to address this occupation, and secondly, it carries no weight with the world conscious. Foregrounding this implication is the environmental ethic that Karmi is reminding us of through her text. She seems to be raising an environmental ethical question that by what justification should this appropriation of land be happening under the PA.

Many other scholars have written about these expansionist modes of 'ethno-colonial' establishments. Sharri Plonski's 2018 book *Palestinian Citizens of Israel: Power, Resistance and the Struggle for Space* studies the civil society's resistance

The recent episodes of violent forced evictions and brazen-faced attitude of the Israeli society and government stand as a continuation of what Karmi wrote in 2015

The stability and sustainability of a politically balanced Palestine may only be realized when some of the following suggestions may be considered seriously

from within Israel. Her work studies these “practices of the ethnonational/settler-colonial state,” as she calls it, “into Palestinian spaces on both sides of Greenline.”⁵⁰ Though her work is mostly concerned with the Palestinian resistance within Israel, Plonski views this impactation of Palestinian spaces on both sides of the Greenline as a settler colonialism (dialectics of space and power and containment). She also sees these disciplinary strategies of Palestinian lives as dialectically producing the occasions for Palestinian Resistance. In other words, the illegal confiscation of Palestinian spaces is bound to bring about Palestinian resistance as Karmi narrates in the incident of Beitunia and many other places. The recent episodes of violent forced evictions and brazen-faced attitude of the Israeli society and government stand as a continuation of what Karmi wrote in 2015.

The irony in this term, Greenline, raises (or should raise) a pertinent connection in our minds as we travel with Karmi and her friend Annetta, to join a “demonstration against the separation wall at Abu Dis, a village on the outskirts of Jerusalem.”⁵¹ The term ‘Green’ evokes all kinds of assorted environmentalism that have become coveted disciplines in contemporary scholarship. However, it is yet to be seen, whether the wall at Abu Dis is truly an environmental concern or falls in the category of the blanket assertions of environmentalism,⁵² as compared to the environmental ethic of this Palestinian place. Or is it a manifestation of what Plonski argues as a case of erasing “Palestinian space from Judaized landscape.”⁵³ Karmi tells us that this demonstration was a regular weekly occurrence (which may be no more as she is writing it for 2005) which drew the activists from around the area. Her friend Annetta’s car, with an Israeli number plate, could pass through the checkpoints in relative ease as compared to the “long queue of white-number-plated Palestinian cars.” The Qalandia checkpoint “was unpleasant and difficult to cross even then, in 2005.” However, writing this memoir in 2015, she tells us that it has become so formidable now that the “barrier to shut Ramallah off from Jerusalem”⁵⁴ has become a kind of a border crossing between two states.

Taking a longer circuitous route to reach the demonstration on the wall of Abu Dis from the Israeli side of the wall and passing through the Qalandia checkpoint reminds us of similar experiences Salman Abu Sitta writes about in his memoir, *Mapping My Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (2016). He tells how he was ashamed that they had relatively easier “treatment as foreigners at the crossing, while a hundred meters away, my people were being herded in long, caged corridors and subjected to long, humiliating interrogations.”⁵⁵

After covering the alternate route, when they eventually come to Himza crossing, Karmi can see another impacted “Palestinian village which had lost its land to the surrounding Jewish settlements, including the land on which the checkpoint stood.” She describes the striking difference between the large settlement of Pisgat Ze’ev on her right and the “dusty improvised Himza”⁵⁶ on the opposite side of the checkpoint. Her friend points at several Jewish settlements of Neve Yaakov, Givat Binyamin, Almon, and French Hill settlement, with their identical-looking European-style houses, an “ungainly carve-up of what had been a harmonious, gentle landscape.”⁵⁷ The Israeli side of the wall of Abu Dis that they had come to, which separated it from the West Bank side, shows Karmi a part of the “most fertile farmland...included within Jerusalem’s municipal boundaries.” Karmi’s words may give a better understanding of this confiscated land:

The place looked deserted, unnaturally quiet, like a ghost town. There were about fifteen demonstrators already there, some of them chalking slogans onto the wall about freedom for Palestinians and chatting to each other. Why so few, I wondered? Did this infamous place not deserve many more? Should there not have been armies of protestors against this wanton incision into the heart of a little farming village?⁵⁸

In my opinion (if I am allowed to be a little sarcastic here), Karmi should not be asking any questions for the ‘wanton incision’ as she calls it, because she herself has given an answer to this question in her book, *Married to Another Man: Israel’s Dilemma in Palestine* (2007), when she quotes Moshe Dayan and Benny Morris’ declarative statements. According to Moshe Dayan:

Let us not today fling accusations at the murderers. Who are we that we should argue against their hatred? For eight years now, they sit in their refugee camps in Gaza and, before their very eyes we turn into our homestead the land and the villages in which they and their forefathers have lived. We are a generation of settlers, and without the steel helmet and the cannon we cannot plant a tree and build a home. Let us not shrink back when we see the hatred fermenting and filling the lives of hundreds of thousands of Arabs, who sit all around us. Let us not avert our gaze, so that our hand shall not slip. This is the fate of our generation, the choice of our life –to be prepared and armed, strong and tough– or otherwise, the sword will slip from our fist, and our life will be snuffed out.⁵⁹

This candid avowal clearly indicates that the occupiers know the level of commitment that is required of them. Dayan’s words conjure up the imagery of holding the swords in their hands without averting their gaze otherwise the ones from whom they have confiscated their belongings are bound to retaliate and attempt to take back their snatched belongings and he knows that they are justified to do so.



Al-Shati Refugee
Camp in Gaza
City seen on
May 15, 2017,
where displaced
Palestinians have
lived since their
exile 69 years
previously during
the *Nakba* in
1948. May 15 is
the official date
to commemorate
the *Nakba*, also
known as Day of
the Catastrophe,
which led to the
displacement
of 750,000
Palestinians as
the state of Israeli
was established.
ALI JADALLAH / AA

This quote when read with Benny Morris' conviction brings out the level of ill will and acrimony that the occupying forces had to exercise to remain in control as Karmi notes: "Morris maintains the mistake the Zionists made was to have allowed any Palestinians to remain... (and) concludes, the Zionist project is faced with two options: perpetual cruelty and repression of others, or the end of the dream. For Zionists, the latter is tragically unthinkable."⁶⁰ If we read these conclusive remarks of Morris with Moshe Dayan's quote, we should be able to understand the tenacity of this 'Environmentalism' of the Zionist project, against which the environmental ethic of the looted land stands almost no chance, and yet Karmi states this environmental ethic of her land, nonetheless. Therefore, if the wall "ends up spanning more than 400 miles of land"⁶¹ (when she was there, now it is more than 700 miles), shutting off the light and everything else behind it, it has a long historical reason behind it.

Beitunia, Bil'in, or Abu Dis, the names do not matter in this appropriation of land that Karmi witnesses. The activists, the usual group of mixed people of liberal Jewish Israelis, some local Palestinians, some foreigners involved in human rights, from various countries, with their usual activists' uniforms of 'T-shirts, faded jeans, sandals or casual shoes,' cannot alleviate the depressing part of confiscating major portions of 'best farming land and water sources' into the 'Israeli side,' which Karmi sees as a 'simple seizure of other people's property.' Her description of the apartheid walls that she witnesses around the (supposed) Greenline brings out the obfuscations about these "walled silence[s of] slate-grey slabs of solid concrete,...at least eight meters or twenty-six feet

Palestine today is one of the worst nightmares of human history, the modern-day holocaust, and yet, never given any name in this capacity

high,” as ominously towering over her when she cranes her neck to “see up to the top.”⁶² The concrete of the wall, smooth to her touch, makes her understand the implications of this wall that all the activists have come around to protest against.

Conclusion: Future Policy Implications

It may be argued, that through Karmi's narrative we come to understand the need for a more historically informed and geographically balanced environmental ethic. Since this is a conceptual paper and a part of an ongoing study in the debates of an environmental ethic, it highlights the importance of some steps that may be adopted as a matter of policy. The stability and sustainability of a politically balanced Palestine may only be realized when some of the following suggestions may be considered seriously.

- By questioning the unexamined political slogans, the *idées reçues*, of Greenline and other popularized narratives, Karmi's text can be seen as demanding a historically answerable environmental ethic as endorsed in Nixon's article “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism.” Therefore, there can be no peace in the region when there are numerous social injustices of best-farming lands being confiscated from the original inhabitants, or appropriation of the food, merchandise, and even the landscape of an Arab place⁶³ with pervasive and belligerent Israeli propaganda.
- Due to the de facto ongoing economic marginalization and erasure of Palestinian identity both at the hands of settler colonialists (apartheid walls, Israeli settlements, and extremely gruesome checkpoints, etc.) and the pseudo representative bodies like the Palestinian Authority with their voracious inner games, a decolonizing process may not be achieved. Only informed world opinion about the interpellated Palestinian reality may be helpful for the real Palestine – a place where the choices of Palestinians are even reduced to either work for the Israeli settlements where their villages once stood, or to face severe unemployment. The studied narrative of Karmi seems to subvert the American brand of blinkered environmentalism.
- Karmi's narrative also questions the efficacy of any protests when there are standing orders of the Israeli army to stop “anyone getting close to the construction site.” Her skepticism seems justified about different forms of “heroic” resistances because they are unable to stop any “truncated village

[returning] to a walled silence.”⁶⁴ Therefore, the least that can be done is to apprise the world of the social, economic, and environmental injustices that are a norm for the Palestinians, and also, to state the environmental ethic of their basic human and legal rights to a normal life, which is only possible after substantive measures for justice.

- To understand the impact of interpellative and ideological strategies of the occupying Israeli forces, we need to account for the shocking realities that Special Rapporteurs keep releasing. It is time for a clear declaration of an environmental ethic of Palestine for a sustainable and peaceful future of not only this region but the world at large.
- Palestine today is one of the worst nightmares of human history, the modern-day holocaust, and yet, never given any name in this capacity. Nor are the injustices and killings going on in this land ever brought to the light of justice, as was undertaken with the Nuremberg trials. The environmental justice of this realm cannot be realized unless the perpetuating factors are questioned, just as the “Nuremberg Trials saw the first large-scale investigations into the psyche and motivations of perpetrators of state violence and shaped the discourse on perpetrators, legal and moral accountability, and crimes against humanity, a concept that was coined in response to the Holocaust.”⁶⁵
- The cited quotes of Dayan and Morris stand as one example of the scale and nature of military violence and war crimes that call for the international judicial tribunal, to bring even a retrospective justice to the crimes committed against humanity in Palestine.
- Lastly, the Palestinians should have the right to return to their homes with dignity. Like Karmi, Salman Abu Sitta’s lifelong pursuit has been to discover how his homeland was destroyed but he is also hopeful that justice would prevail one day, and they would be able to return, just like the birds that “would fly out of their nests in our well and hover in the skies before landing back down again.”⁶⁶ ■

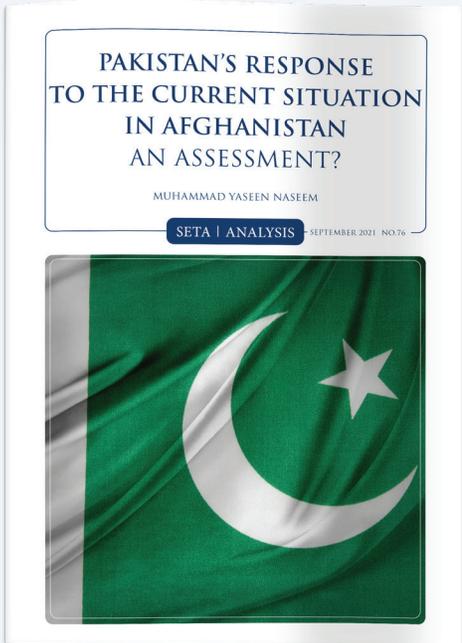
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Pakistan's Response to the Current Situation in Afghanistan | An Assessment

Muhammad Yaseen Naseem

Afghans have a historic opportunity to decide their future and neighboring countries must help them by recognizing the new realities emerging in Afghanistan.

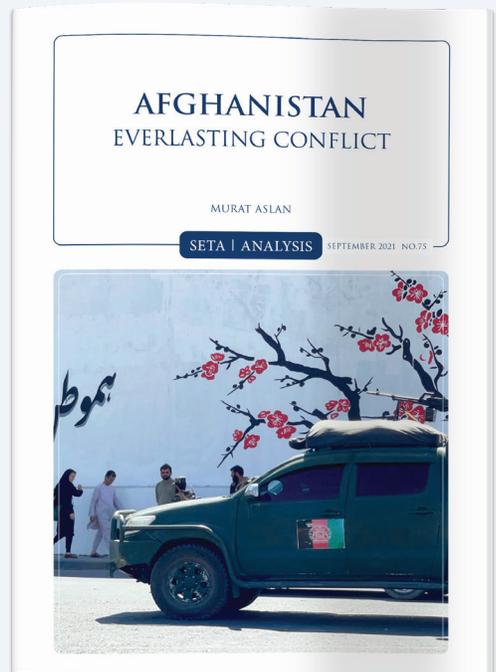


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