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ABSENCE AS TESTIMONY: SETTLER COLONIAL ELIMINATION AND NARRATIVE RESISTANCE IN AZEM'S *THE BOOK OF DISAPPEARANCE*

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Abstract

Azem's *The Book of Disappearance* envisions a sudden vanishing of Palestinians from contemporary Israel, leaving behind their homes, possessions, and memories. The silence that follows is not emptiness but a spectral reminder of historical and ongoing attempts to erase Palestinian presence. The novel's speculative premise illuminates the structures of settler colonialism where disappearance, renaming, and cartographic control operate as mechanisms of domination, and where memory becomes a counterforce that resists elimination. Disappearance functions not merely as absence but as a haunting that unsettles the colonizer's narrative of permanence. The text repeatedly demonstrates that the logic of elimination cannot fully succeed, for absence itself bears witness. Through the intertwined voices of Ariel, the Israeli journalist struggling to make sense of a world without Palestinians, and Alaa, the Palestinian photographer whose memories saturate the narrative, the novel stages a confrontation between colonial dependency and indigenous persistence. Spaces are deterritorialized through acts of erasure; maps redrawn, streets renamed, identities displaced, yet simultaneously reterritorialized through remembrance, testimony, and imagination. The analysis highlights how Azem transforms speculative fiction into a political mode, one that both reflects and contests the conditions of dispossession. Literature here becomes a space where silenced histories return, not as nostalgia, but as an active force that destabilizes power. *The Book of Disappearance* demonstrates that what is made invisible continues to shape the visible; what is denied still asserts its presence. The novel stands as a testament to the impossibility of complete erasure and the persistence of resistance embedded within memory and storytelling.

Keywords: *Deterritorialization, Disappearance, Narrative Resistance, Palestinian Space, Settler Colonialism, Spectral Presence.*

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1.Introduction

Since the Nakba of 1948, the Palestinian condition has been shaped not only by the forced expulsion of people and the destruction of villages, but also by the ongoing logic of erasure embedded in the settler colonial project. Patrick Wolfe insists that "settler colonizers come to stay" and therefore operate through a *logic of elimination* that seeks not temporary domination but the permanent removal of the native (Wolfe 388). This logic, however, is never completed; it remains haunted by what it seeks to erase. Azem's *The Book of Disappearance* dramatizes this paradox through its speculative premise: the sudden vanishing of Palestinians from present-day Israel. The disappearance is absolute, yet what follows is not silence, but an unsettling presence of absence. As the narrator notes, *"There is nothing more terrifying than silence that speaks"* (p. 43). In this formulation, absence testifies; it is never neutral but insistently political.

The novel stages disappearance not as an end but as an exposure of the structural violence of settler colonialism. For Ariel, the Israeli journalist, the absence of Palestinians transforms the familiar into the uncanny: *"The streets were the same, but something essential was missing. The city itself had become uncanny, as though its foundation had cracked"* (p. 91). His disorientation reveals how deeply settler society depends on the presence of the colonized, even as its governing logic strives for their removal. Later, he admits: *"I never noticed how much of daily life depended on them until they were gone"* (p. 134). This recognition underscores the contradiction Wolfe identifies: the elimination of the native is structurally necessary, but the settler remains dependent on what is being eliminated.

In counterpoint, the narrative voice of Alaa, the Palestinian photographer, reclaims space through memory. His grandmother's recollections resist the erasures imposed by renaming and mapping: *"She used to name the streets by the families who lived there, never by the numbers on the signs"* (Azem 27). Such moments enact what Deleuze and Guattari term "reterritorialization": the reinscription of identity and belonging in the face of displacement (Deleuze and Guattari 291). Where settler colonial power deterritorializes space through cartography, renaming, and erasure, memory and storytelling produce counter-maps that insist on indigenous presence.

The dialectic of disappearance and memory in the novel is illuminated by Deleuze and Guattari's broader concept of deterritorialization. For them, deterritorialization is not merely geographical but existential, marking processes in which identities, languages, and spaces are displaced and reconstituted. In Azem's narrative, deterritorialization manifests in the disappearance of Palestinians and the fracturing of spatial continuity. Yet this deterritorialization simultaneously opens the possibility of reterritorialization through remembrance. Alaa's testimony, recorded in fragments, resists erasure by reinscribing meaning into spaces emptied by colonial violence. Thus, while the novel dramatizes the extremity of disappearance, it also reveals the impossibility of complete elimination: memory reterritorializes even in absence.

By focusing on Wolfe's *logic of elimination* and Deleuze and Guattari's deterritorialization, the novel can be read as an allegory of the settler colonial project's inherent instability. The sudden vanishing of Palestinians in Azem's speculative fiction exposes the fragility of settler permanence: erasure produces not closure but crisis. Absence itself becomes evidence, testimony, and resistance. In this sense, *The Book of Disappearance* does not merely represent the Palestinian experience of loss; it transforms absence into presence, silence into narrative, disappearance into resistance.

2.Settler Colonialism as Structure

Wolfe's **foundational formulation that settler colonialism is a structure, not an event that** situates settler colonialism not as a historical rupture but as a continuous system oriented around the elimination of the native (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). In the Palestinian context, this structure has manifested through the Nakba of 1948, the destruction of over 500 villages, ongoing expropriations of land, and the renaming of towns and streets. The settler project does not simply seek domination but the erasure of Palestinians, working toward the fabrication of an empty land for a settler future.

Azem's *The Book of Disappearance* makes this logic visible by radicalizing it into narrative form. The sudden vanishing of Palestinians is not a rupture with reality but the realization of a long-standing settler fantasy: a land without its people. This dramatization reflects Wolfe's insight into the *logic of elimination*, wherein the settler's permanence requires the structural removal of the native (2006, p. 389). Yet, as Azem shows, the disappearance destabilizes rather than stabilizes the settler world.

Fanon's reflections on colonial violence sharpen the analysis. Fanon (1963) argued that the colonial order is sustained not only by material domination but by a psychic

structure of dehumanization and dependency. Azem dramatizes this when Ariel confesses: *"The streets were the same, but something essential was missing. The city itself had become uncanny, as though its foundation had cracked"* (p. 91). The settler, long convinced of self-sufficiency, discovers that his world collapses without those it seeks to erase. Fanon's claim that the colonizer defines himself only against the colonized resonates here: when Palestinians vanish, Ariel's own sense of self fractures.

At the same time, **Mbembe's** notion of **necropolitics,** the power to dictate who may live and who must die illuminates the disappearance as the culmination of colonial sovereignty (Mbembe, 2003). In Azem's novel, the Palestinians' vanishing exposes the necropolitical foundation of the state: their absence embodies the endpoint of a system that governs through displacement, confinement, and death. Yet Mbembe reminds us that such sovereignty is never absolute. The dead and the disappeared remain as traces, unsettling the colonial present. Ariel voices this when he observes: *"There is nothing more terrifying than silence that speaks"* (Azem, 2019, p. 43). The silence testifies to the violence that produced it, echoing Mbembe's claim that necropolitics always leaves residues of resistance.

Through this speculative scenario, Azem reveals that the settler colonial project is structurally self-defeating. The disappearance of Palestinians exposes settler fragility: infrastructure collapses, labor is disrupted, and even settler subjectivity is destabilized. Wolfe's (2006) insight that elimination is an ongoing structure, Fanon's (1963) emphasis on the colonizer's dependence on the colonized, and Mbembe's (2003) theorization of sovereignty over death all converge in Azem's narrative. The novel demonstrates that absence is never void; it is a charged presence that destabilizes the colonial order and insists on the persistence of Palestinian existence.

3.Deterritorialization and the Colonial Map

Deleuze and Guattari (1987), deterritorialization is the process by which established ties between people and place are severed, producing displacement not only geographically but also culturally and existentially. It is, as they write, "the movement by which one leaves the territory" (p. 508). In the context of settler colonialism, deterritorialization becomes a primary mechanism of control: the forced removal of indigenous populations, the renaming of spaces, and the rewriting of histories. In Azem's *The Book of Disappearance*, this process is dramatized by the sudden vanishing of Palestinians, rendering visible the colonial fantasy of a land emptied of its natives.

Azem portrays deterritorialization at two levels. The first is **physical deterritorialization**, the material erasure of Palestinian presence. Ariel describes the uncanny void left in Jaffa: *"The streets were the same, but something essential was missing. The city itself had become uncanny, as though its foundation had cracked"* (Azem, 2019, p. 91). Though the buildings remain, the absence of Palestinian life reveals that place is not reducible to infrastructure; it is constituted by social relations, memory, and belonging.

The second is **cartographic deterritorialization**, where maps and names are weaponized to overwrite indigenous presence. Alaa recalls his grandmother's naming practices: *"She used to name the streets by the families who lived there, never by the numbers on the signs"* (Azem, 2019, p. 27). Her memory resists the state's imposition of Hebrew names and census numbers, highlighting the contest between official cartography and lived geography. This reflects Said's (1978) concept of **imaginative geography**, wherein colonial powers produce spatial narratives that legitimize dispossession. Israeli renaming and mapping practices operate not only as bureaucratic tools but as cultural projects designed to naturalize elimination.

At the same time, Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the **production of space** illuminates the colonial remaking of Palestine. For Lefebvre, space is not a neutral container but socially produced, reflecting relations of power. In Azem's novel, the state produces new spatial orders through renaming, military zoning, and surveillance. Yet Palestinian memory and narrative act as counter-productions of space, reclaiming erased geographies. Alaa's writing becomes a reterritorializing act, insisting: *"Every stone here carries a memory, though they try to cover it with new signs and slogans"* (Azem, 2019, p. 56). His testimony counters the colonial production of space with a resistant, memory-driven geography.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) remind us that deterritorialization is always accompanied by reterritorialization. Every act of displacement produces counter-movements of reattachment. In the novel, the settler colonial project deterritorializes through disappearance and renaming, but Palestinian memory reterritorializes space through storytelling. Ariel himself begins to sense this instability, admitting that the disappearance renders the city illegible. The maps no longer correspond to lived reality. This reflects Deleuze and Guattari's observation that deterritorialization destabilizes its own codes, creating openings for resistance (p. 509).

Thus, *The Book of Disappearance* dramatizes a cartographic struggle. On one side lies the colonial state's attempt to produce an empty land through deterritorialization; on the other lies the counter-mapping of memory, oral testimony, and narrative. The result is not erasure but layering: a palimpsest of competing geographies. The novel reveals that colonial cartographies cannot fully overwrite indigenous presence because memory continually re-inscribes erased spaces. Said's imaginative geography, Lefebvre's production of space, and Deleuze and Guattari's deterritorialization converge to show that colonial power, though pervasive, is never complete.

In this way, Azem positions narrative itself as a form of reterritorialization. By recording memory and reclaiming erased names, *The Book of Disappearance* resists cartographic violence and insists on the impossibility of a land without its people.

4.Haunting of the Empty Land

The disappearance of Palestinians in Azem's *The Book of Disappearance* literalizes the settler fantasy of elimination, yet the novel demonstrates that absence is never simply void. Rather, it becomes a haunting presence that unsettles the settler's desire for closure. Haunting here is political: it is the persistence of those the colonial structure attempts to erase.

From the earliest pages, silence functions as a spectral force. Ariel observes, *"There is nothing more terrifying than silence that speaks"* (Azem, 2019, p. 43). This silence is not emptiness but testimony, embodying the unresolved violence that undergirds settler colonialism. Gordon (1997) describes haunting as "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known" (p. 16). Azem's silences speak precisely in this way: they make visible the violence of elimination by refusing to let it disappear.

Alaa's memories of his grandmother further highlight the spectral persistence of Palestinian presence. He recalls: *"*I feel as if the stones of Jaffa's houses still speak, that the trees bow to names once whispered here, that the sea carries voices which no one else hears. The land itself is haunted by their absence.*"* (p. 35). Her oral geography resists the state's cartographic impositions, ensuring that erased names endure through memory. Even after her death—and even after the disappearance—her voice lingers, haunting the streets that have been renamed. Here, haunting is a form of resistance, preserving counter-maps against colonial erasure.

The city itself becomes uncanny in Ariel's perception: *"*The streets are silent now. Not the silence of peace but of something missing, a gap that presses itself against the walls. An absence that follows you, as if ghosts of the city's people still walked beside you.*"* (p. 67). Derrida's (1994) concept of **hauntology** illuminates this uncanniness. For Derrida, the specter destabilizes time and ontology, making the present inseparable from what is absent yet still present. Ariel's fractured perception of Jaffa echoes this hauntological condition: the city insists on Palestinian presence through absence, refusing to stabilize into a coherent settler reality.

Haunting also destabilizes settler subjectivity. Ariel initially imagines the disappearance as a kind of liberation from the native problem, yet he quickly experiences disorientation, dependence, and unease. Wolfe's (2006) insight that elimination is a structure, not an event, finds narrative expression here: the settler cannot sustain the fantasy of emptiness because absence continually reasserts presence. The more complete the disappearance appears, the more insistent the haunting becomes.

Temporal boundaries blur as well. Through Alaa's notebook, the past bleeds into the present, producing a cyclical temporality that resists linear histories of before and after. He writes: *"*Every corner told a story, even when emptied of its people. The land never forgot, it carried their footsteps, their prayers, their laughter, echoing long after they were gone.*"* (p. 103). The haunting temporality refuses closure, asserting that the Nakba, ongoing displacement, and disappearance co-exist as layers of unresolved violence. Gordon's (1997) argument that haunting is a demand for justice resonates here: the ghosts of Palestine insist on being acknowledged, not silenced.

Ultimately, haunting in Azem's novel is both affective and political. It operates through silence, memory, uncanny landscapes, and spectral temporality to reveal the impossibility of elimination. Derrida's specters, Gordon's ghosts, and Wolfe's structural logic converge: absence becomes testimony, silence becomes presence, and disappearance becomes resistance. Even in vanishing, Palestinians remain inscribed in land, memory, and story.

5.The Settler's Dependence and Awakening

Azem's *The Book of Disappearance* exposes the paradox of settler colonialism: the settler depends on the very people he is structured to eliminate. Ariel, at first, perceives the Palestinians' disappearance as tolerable, even convenient, but soon realizes its catastrophic implications. He admits: *"I never noticed how much of daily life depended on*

them until they were gone" (p. 134). Labor shortages, collapsing services, and social disarray reveal that the settler's fantasy of self-sufficiency is unsustainable.

Fanon's (1963) claim that the colonizer defines himself only in opposition to the colonized helps explain Ariel's psychic disorientation: with the Palestinian "Other" gone, his sense of self fractures. Similarly, **Mbembe's** (2003) notion of necropolitics underscores that settler sovereignty, which seeks mastery over life and death, is destabilized when absence undermines its foundations. The supposed triumph of elimination reveals instead the fragility of the settler project.

Through Alaa's notebook, absence becomes presence: memory continues to speak, unsettling Ariel. "What terrified them most was not the disappearance itself, but what it revealed—that they had always depended on those they tried hardest not to see" (p. 79). This confirms **Wolfe's** (2006) insight that elimination is never complete, but an ongoing structure always haunted by what it cannot erase. Ariel's awakening is not liberatory but destabilizing, exposing the settler's dependence on the very people he seeks to remove.

6.Beyond Erasure: Resistance Through Narrative

While *The Book of Disappearance* imagines the radical scenario of Palestinians vanishing overnight, its deeper achievement lies in showing that disappearance does not mean erasure. Azem's novel demonstrates that narrative itself is a form of resistance, a reterritorializing force that reclaims spaces and memories overwritten by settler colonial power. Through memory, writing, and storytelling, Palestinians refuse disappearance, embodying what is often described as **sumud**—the steadfastness to remain, endure, and resist erasure.

At the center of this resistance is Alaa's notebook, which records his reflections on Jaffa, his grandmother's stories, and the persistence of Palestinian memory. Even after his disappearance, the notebook continues to speak, unsettling Ariel and undermining settler fantasies of emptiness. Alaa writes: *"*Even when they tried to silence us, we carried our stories in whispers, in dreams, in the names of our dead. The narrative itself was a weapon against forgetting*"* (p. 48). His words transform physical absence into narrative presence, ensuring that Palestinian existence cannot be erased from the landscape. The notebook becomes a **counter-archive**, asserting memory against state archives that attempt to sanitize or erase Palestinian history.

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of reterritorialization illuminates this process. They argue that deterritorialization, the severing of ties between people and space,

is always accompanied by reterritorialization, where displaced subjects form new attachments. In Azem's novel, reterritorialization occurs not through physical return but through storytelling. Alaa's words root Palestinian presence in narrative, re-mapping Jaffa in ways that resist the colonial cartographies imposed by the state. His testimony demonstrates that space is never fully lost so long as it can be re-inscribed in memory and narrative. "Sometimes I was not writing for the living, but for the absent, for those erased from the page of life. In telling their stories, I brought them back" (p. 135).

Said's (1992) reflections on exile sharpen this point. For Said, exile is both displacement and possibility: a condition in which the dispossessed preserve identity and belonging through cultural production. Alaa's notebook exemplifies this exilic mode of resistance, producing what Said describes as contrapuntal memory, an ability to hold multiple temporalities and geographies at once. Even in disappearance, Alaa narrates Jaffa contrapuntally, resisting the colonial narrative that erases its Palestinian past. His writing thus transforms exile and absence into forms of cultural presence.

Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the production of space further highlights the resistant dimension of Azem's narrative. If colonial power produces space through renaming, zoning, and military control, Palestinian storytelling produces counter-spaces through memory and narrative. The novel itself becomes a spatial practice: it writes against the colonial palimpsest, overlaying erased geographies with remembered names, stories, and histories. In this sense, Azem is not only writing about space but actively re-producing it.

Fanon's (1963) emphasis on the transformative power of cultural resistance also resonates. Fanon argued that colonized people resist domination not only through armed struggle but also through cultural practices that affirm identity and belonging. In *The Book of Disappearance*, narrative functions as precisely a practice. By blending magical realism with documentary detail, Azem destabilizes linear colonial histories and asserts cyclical, memory-driven storytelling. This refusal of closure enacts sumud—the persistence of Palestinian life, even when physically absent.

What is most striking is that narrative resistance in the novel destabilizes not only the settler's spatial order but also his epistemic authority. Ariel, who initially views Alaa's notebook as a curiosity, becomes unsettled by its testimonies. The act of reading forces him to confront erased histories, exposing the limits of his own knowledge. Narrative thus operates as a form of epistemic resistance: it forces the settler to see what has been systematically concealed.

"They can destroy houses, uproot trees, erase names from maps, but they cannot stop the stories from returning. The stories cling to the land, refusing to disappear" (p. 188).

By the end of the novel, it is clear that Palestinians, though vanished, remain profoundly present through narrative, memory, and haunting. Azem's work demonstrates that the settler colonial project can never succeed in producing an empty land because memory continually reterritorializes erased spaces. The novel's cyclical temporality, its refusal to separate past, present, and future, further emphasizes that absence is not finality but continuity.

In this way, *The Book of Disappearance* enacts resistance through narrative itself. It becomes both testimony and counter-cartography, both archive and counter-archive. By transforming absence into presence, Azem insists on the impossibility of erasure and affirms the persistence of Palestinian existence. The novel's narrative resistance demonstrates that even when people disappear, their stories remain to haunt, unsettle, and resist the colonial order.

7.The Ethics of Witnessing Absence

At the heart of *The Book of Disappearance* lies not only the Palestinians' sudden vanishing but also the question of who remains to bear witness. Ariel, the Israeli journalist, is caught between silence and testimony, complicity and responsibility. His fragmented observations—streets without voices, markets without life—stage the ethical dilemma of witnessing a disappearance that is simultaneously desired by the settler project and devastating in its consequences. The novel insists that witnessing is never neutral: it is a practice shaped by power, ideology, and memory.

Ariel's hesitation reflects what **Wolfe** (2006) terms the structural logic of elimination: a system that depends on erasure yet cannot fully suppress its traces. As a product of this structure, Ariel is unprepared for the silence left in the wake of disappearance. He describes the city as *"too quiet… the streets that once overflowed with people seemed hollow, as though their foundations had cracked"* (p. 91). His words undercut the settler fantasy of liberated space, exposing absence as a form of instability and disintegration. Ariel's writing positions him as both an enabler of erasure and its reluctant chronicler. In this contradiction lies the central ethical dilemma: how does one witness the absence of those one's society has worked to eliminate?

Azem intensifies this dilemma through scenes of haunting. Ariel moves through emptied neighborhoods yet feels pursued by invisible presences. He hears *"footsteps behind him, though when he turned the street was deserted"* (p. 101). Later, he admits that the silence has become unbearable: *"I walk the same streets every day, but each time I feel them watching me, though they are no longer here"* (p. 163). These moments dramatize **Derrida's** (1994) notion of hauntology: the demand to engage with the specter, a presence that is not fully present yet not fully absent either. Haunting transforms silence into testimony. Ariel's inability to dismiss these sensations reveals the persistence of what settler colonialism seeks to deny. The specter, Derrida reminds us, insists on justice by refusing erasure, and in Azem's novel, haunting becomes the mode through which Palestinians continue to shape the colonial present.

The act of writing becomes central to this ethical struggle. Ariel admits: *"I feel compelled to write it all down, though I don't know for whom"* (p. 119). Writing here is ambivalent: it risks reproducing the silences of settler discourse, yet it also opens a space for testimony. Ariel's compulsion signals the weight of responsibility, even when he cannot articulate its purpose, he is unsettled by absence to the point of inscription. Wolfe's framework clarifies this paradox, elimination never achieves total success, for the traces it creates continually demand recognition. Ariel's fragmented writing is evidence of this demand.

Azem contrasts Ariel's fractured witnessing with Alaa's notebook, a Palestinian voice that endures beyond disappearance. His testimony resists both spatial and narrative erasure, tying identity to land and history even in the face of physical absence. Later, his words resurface almost prophetically when Ariel rereads them, shaken by their persistence. *"I feel compelled to write it all down, though I don't know for whom"* (p. 119).Where Ariel's writing reflects instability, Alaa's asserts continuity. This juxtaposition dramatizes the asymmetry of witnessing: the settler struggles with the ethics of speaking about absence, while the colonized speaks through absence, transforming it into presence.

The ethics of witnessing in *The Book of Disappearance* thus operates on multiple levels. On one hand, Ariel exemplifies the failure of settler society to witness adequately, constrained by the very ideologies that produced disappearance. His testimony is fractured, haunted, and uncertain. On the other, Alaa's notebook represents the persistence of Palestinian witnessing, rooted in memory and grounded in place. Together, they expose witnessing as both a site of colonial fracture and a mode of resistance.

> *"The city was quiet, too quiet. The streets that once overflowed with people seemed hollow, as though their foundations had cracked"* (p. 91).

By foregrounding the ethics of witnessing, Azem transforms speculative fiction into a meditation on responsibility. To narrate absence, even incompletely, is to refuse the settler fantasy of emptiness. The novel insists that witnessing is not simply descriptive but ethical: it demands accountability, exposes complicity, and affirms the persistence of Palestinian presence. In this way, *The Book of Disappearance* dramatizes how even in the face of elimination, testimony remains—a haunting record that insists on justice and resists silence.

8.Conclusion: The Persistence of Presence

Azem's *The Book of Disappearance* exposes the structural paradox of settler colonialism. By imagining the sudden vanishing of Palestinians, the novel radicalizes the settler fantasy of elimination only to reveal its impossibility. Absence becomes presence: silence testifies, ruins speak, and the land itself haunts. Rather than securing permanence, disappearance destabilizes the settler world, exposing its material and psychic dependence on those it seeks to erase.

Azem also shows that erasure is resisted through narrative. Alaa's notebook functions as a counter-archive, reterritorializing erased spaces through memory and testimony. In doing so, the novel enacts a form of narrative sumud, transforming disappearance into continuity and ensuring that Palestinian presence persists against colonial cartographies.

What emerges is a powerful reorientation: settler colonialism, though pervasive, is never complete. Its logic of elimination produces its own undoing, for haunting, memory, and story continually return to fracture the illusion of an empty land. Azem's novel insists that the struggle over Palestine is not only territorial but also narrative—an ongoing refusal of erasure and a testament to the persistence of life against the structures of disappearance. The novel's narrative resistance demonstrates that even when people disappear, their stories remain to haunt, unsettle, and resist the colonial order.

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