

Review of *Lordship and Liberation in Palestine-Israel: The Promise of Decolonial Sovereignties* by Muhannad Ayyash. New York: Columbia University Press, 2025. Paperback. 384 Pages. ISBN: 9780231220811

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In his 2019 book, *A Hermeneutics of Violence*, Dr Mark Muhannad Ayyash proposed a four-dimensional conceptual framework of violence within which participants in “violent interactions” gradually transform into and operate as interlocked subjectivities or “enemy-siblings” — mimetic entities that begin to “resemble each other in some fundamental ways through violence” (Ayyash 2019, 14). The deliberate compounding of Palestine and Israel in the title of Ayyash’s recent book, *Lordship and Liberation in Palestine-Israel* (2025), is demonstrably contextualised within this critical paradigm and opens up unique opportunities for radical engagement with interconnected ideas of land, lordship, multidimensional violence, Israeli settler-colonial sovereignty, anti-colonial resistance and decoloniality in Palestine, *inter alia*.

Over the last two years, Palestine has bled into our collective consciousness in ways that, at times, defy attempts at prosaic or formulaic analysis. Yet, Ayyash’s book, animated and informed by the author’s personal and ancestral ties to the besieged land and people of Palestine, manages to establish a functional and critical schema that is both specific and generative in its focus on the issues of sovereignty,

coloniality and resistance in Palestine-Israel, through a dialogical approach “to the study of violence [...] in its elusiveness,” which is examined alongside questions of land, lordship and liberation (Ayyash 2025, 9). It invites a recalibration and expansion of these ideas, derived from the author’s earlier postulations on a four-dimensional conception of violence (instrumental, linguistic, mimetic and transcendental). The book, additionally, offers a nuanced dissection of the aspirations of settler colonial sovereignty in an attempt to explicate its modalities and practices and to expose its annihilatory agendas and aims (i.e., violent expulsion of indigenous populations).

Ayyash develops his key arguments in *Lordship and Liberation in Palestine-Israel* across six main chapters and a brief but impactful conclusion. The first chapter, “Settler Colonial Sovereignty,” reveals a crucial lacuna in the current theorisations on the topic which, according to Ayyash, fail to address what he considers to be a “core feature” of settler colonial sovereignty, i.e., lordship (Ayyash 2025, 39). Ayyash’s ideas are formulated through a rigorous and methodical exploration of different bodies of scholarship on “sovereignty” in international political theory — from Jens Bartelson’s rejection of the idea of any self-contained or comprehensive “source,” “locus” or “scope” of sovereignty, encompassing Agamben and Derrida’s postulations, to Amy Niang’s deliberations on polities in the Voltaic regions of West Africa through various stages of colonialism. The first section of the chapter focuses almost entirely on “the intractable relationship between sovereignty and space” (*ibid.*), signalling a departure from most European theoretical models which foreground different forms of nationalism (ethnic and civic) and positions the nation-state as “the basic unit of analysis” (Ayyash 2025, 40). Instead, Ayyash recenters the notion of sovereignty as a distinctly spatialised relationship between land and people. In the second section of the chapter, he combines the idea of indivisibility (as a component of settler colonial sovereignty) with the concept of lordship, thus moving his argument towards one of the central claims in the book: “Lordship... [as] the relationship between land and people

where lords are lords by virtue of their aspiration for indivisible, absolute, and omnipresent power" (*ibid.*). This allows him to situate lordship within the "transcendental" or the fourth dimension of violence. The third and final section of the chapter dismisses the proclaimed efficacy of civic nationalism as a possible tool to counter the violence that accompanies the emergence of the modern nation-state, revealing the inherent inadequacy of the macrosocial distinctions between ethnic and civic nationalism in delineating, in any real sense, the contours of violence in settler colonial societies. The chapter, thus, primarily focuses on violence (in the context of settler colonies) as the incommunicable and irreducible "thing itself," instead of the territoriality of the nation-state (Ayyash 2019, 15; Ayyash 2025, 108).

In the second chapter, entitled "Lordship as Violence in the Settler Colony," Ayyash further elaborates on settler colonial lordship as an "underlying posture of violence" and as a necessary precondition for the process of violent expulsion which, in turn, becomes a salient feature of settler colonial sovereignty, strategically legitimised through the consolidation and normalisation of the settler-indigenous binary (Ayyash 2025, 73). Building upon the works of Norbert Elias, Otto Brunner, Eqbal Ahmad and others, Ayyash traces the complex critical terrains of lordship and monopoly rule in history, across and beyond Euro-America, to formulate a theory of lordship that accommodates a more comprehensive understanding of relationships between the social and the political within settler colonies by reconfiguring such sovereignties in terms of their imperative towards territorial expansion through the logics of violent expulsion of indigenous communities. The second part of the chapter is devoted to a closer scrutiny of the structure of expulsion as a "posture of lordship" within the settler colony. Ayyash addresses and consciously moves beyond the limitations of Eurocentric and Marxist views of political economy towards a dialogical analysis (based on the Indigenous theories of Glen Coulthard and Lorenzo Veracini and others) to differentiate colonialism from settler colonialism and lay out the distinct

technologies of genocidal violence, expulsion and abandonment utilised by the settler colony, especially in the context of Zionist settler colonialism. The final section of the chapter analyses the purpose and intent behind structural expulsion and addresses this fraught issue with “the logic of sovereign abandonment” (Ayyash 2025, 95). Ayyash’s arguments are derived from Agamben’s works as well as Derrida’s critique of the same and extend to the author’s own expositions on the “(un)knowability of violence” (as previously advanced in *A Hermeneutics of Violence*) as evinced in the operations of both the Israeli settler colony and the Palestinian resistance (Ayyash 2025, 106).

The next chapter, “The Indigenous-Settler Distinction and the Interlocking of Enemy Siblings,” as its name suggests, expands on the settler-native divide, examines the conceptual entanglement of the coloniser and the colonised as enemy-siblings, and traces the visible manifestations of these orientations in Palestine-Israel. For Ayyash, decolonisation can only be achieved in Palestine-Israel when the settler-indigenous binary is resisted, challenged and, ultimately, entirely dissolved. Yet, paradoxically, such a project would necessitate the initial “cement[ing]” of the distinction between the two groups “in its decolonial form,” so as to generate possibilities for new “decolonial sovereignties” (Ayyash 2025, 116). Through a critical survey of a wide range of texts by authors like Mahmoud Mamdani, Rana Barakat, Raef Zreik, Gabriel Piterberg and others, Ayyash engages in the laborious exercise of disentangling narratives of “origins,” “essence” and indigeneity in his attempt to diagnose the virulence inherent in the Zionist ideology and as part of his ongoing commentary on the complex relationship between settler colonial sovereignty and lordship in Palestine-Israel. The chapter reveals the settler’s prerogative to simultaneously sustain and conceal the settler-indigenous binary in a way that ensures it is never dissolved. In fact, Ayyash claims, “[W]hat the settler fears the most is [...] the dissolution of their settlement as lordship” (Ayyash 2025, 126). So, one must ask, what constitutes the Zionist settler’s “self”? At one point, Ayyash cites Theodore Herzl’s

strategic linking of the moral imaginary of Zionism with Robinson Crusoe in his political writings to cater to white Christian Europeans, illustrating how the Zionist vision of a sovereign Jewish identity relied on establishing it as a projection and analogue of the sovereign European self (Ayyash 2025, 130-131). This allows Ayyash to centre the principle of ethnic purity in the construction and production of an “autochthonous settler self” that must constantly and absolutely distinguish and separate itself from the racialised Palestinian Other (Ayyash 2025, 131-132). In the course of the chapter, Ayyash demonstrates how the originary violence that once served as the founding principle of the Israeli Zionist State has inextricably bound Israel with Palestine, wherein Israel is rendered incapable of producing a sovereign Zionist identity and must continuously exert its lordship to expel Palestinians as a means of asserting its selfhood.

The fourth chapter of the book, “The Four-Dimensional Operation of Violence,” uncovers the complex power relations that underlie the schematics of violence in Palestine-Israel. The author astutely identifies mainstream efforts to “decentralise power relations” or “equate the two sides” in conventional western media narratives across the political spectrum as essentially politicised “attempt[s] to mystify violence” that, in turn, enable Israel’s dangerous and false characterisation of its own violence against Palestinians as self-defence and denigrate the Palestinian resistance as terrorism, thereby perpetuating the violent Zionist settler colonial project through the expulsion and extermination of indigenous Palestinian populations (Ayyash 2025, 149). Israeli violence unfolds in three stages which coincide with and stem from three discernible dimensions of sovereign violence — “fragmentation” of the land of Palestine (instrumental), as spatially embodied in the Separation Wall in the West Bank; “isolation” of the Palestinian body politic (linguistic); and the “dehumanisation” of racialised Palestinians (mimetic) (Ayyash 2025, 150). Ayyash’s analysis of each of these phases of violent unfolding (embedded within broader dimensions of violence) and their

correlations with the spatial strategies and politics of Israeli lordship in Palestine-Israel, bolstered by a dense network of political and historical citations, significantly extends his discourse beyond the insular realm of academic theorisation by activating new modalities of scholarly activism and ethical engagement with the Palestinian struggle.

Having developed his theoretical framework in the first four chapters, the penultimate section of Ayyash's book marks a shift, moving the discourse towards an articulation of "decolonial sovereignties," mainly through a critical reading of two literary texts: Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* and Mahmoud Darwish's *Absent Presence*. While the fifth chapter may initially appear to disrupt the general structure of the book, it presents a necessary transitional space for a close engagement with literary representations of Palestinian homeland and selfhood — a decolonial and sovereign Palestinian 'I' — recovered from the violent histories of erasure, genocide and repressive settler colonial lordship that have forged the traumatic yet inescapable coupling of Palestine-Israel as enemy-siblings.

In the final chapter of the book, entitled "Decolonial Sovereignties," Ayyash scrutinises and tests the possibilities of a sovereign Palestinian nation-state by tracing the history of decolonial liberation movements in Palestine and critically dissecting the historic failures of political bodies like the PA (Palestinian Authority) and the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) against the backdrop of Euro-American hegemony and pro-Zionist policies. The author not only documents the various stages of Palestinian anti-colonial resistance but also explores decolonial aspirations by positing a reconfiguration of relationships between the social and the political. He simultaneously locates and contextualises Palestinian sovereignty as "a claim of belonging between people and land" within a referential matrix of other indigenous, decolonial nation-building projects, such as the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke (Ayyash 2025, 225-227). The main thrust of Ayyash's argument is towards what Mamdani calls "de-Zionisation",

stemming from a critique of a “closed, fixed, univocal, and bounded nationalism,” drawn from the works of Said, Césaire, Fanon and Dabashi (Ayyash 2025, 232; 237). He further expounds on the importance of popular committees in producing decolonial sovereignties that are “layered, shared and multiplying” (as opposed to settler colonial sovereignty, which remains “absolute, omnipresent and indivisible”), especially highlighting the pivotal role played by women’s organisations in fostering cohesion and collectivism among otherwise “hyperpolitical factionalism” and in advancing the ongoing struggle for decolonial sovereignties in Palestine (Ayyash 2025, 243; 250). Ayyash concludes the book by emphatically reasserting the centrality of land in shaping Palestinian selfhood, resistance and decolonial sovereignty. This is supplemented by an anticipation of a radical opposition to and transformation of the existing posture of lordship: “We must move from the terrain where the stench of blood reigns supreme to a terrain guided by the stench of our sweat mixing with the soil, becoming one in our bodies with the soil, with the land” (Ayyash 2025, 265).

Conceived and composed largely during the pandemic and completed a few short weeks before October of 2023, Muhammud Ayyash’s *Lordship and Liberation in Palestine-Israel* is significant not only for its incisive academic insights and robust theorisation but also for its broader relevance to the recent resurgence of public discourse, international scrutiny and global activism in the wake of the live-streamed (and still ongoing) genocide of Palestinians by Israeli forces. Ayyash’s work promises to be a vital addition to the embattled terrains of anti-colonial scholarship, as it unflinchingly confronts the manifest spectres of Zionist settler colonial violence through the critical lens of land and lordship and attempts to offer new pathways towards decoloniality, liberation and Palestinian sovereignty.

Works Cited:

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