

Uncovering Concealed Pasts, Centering Silenced Knowledges

Genocide in Libya: Shar, A Hidden Colonial History by Ali Abdullatif Ahmida offers a rare and preliminary glimpse into the Libyan genocide. In committing to a great undertaking that transcends disciplines, dominant methods, and borders, Ahmida's book attempts to single-handedly make up for scholarly neglect around the brutal Italian Fascist colonial rule in Libya, as well as make room for further scholarly interventions into the silenced genocide. What is particularly captivating is Ahmida's articulation of a non-Western and decolonial methodological intervention that centers and makes visible this silenced history by giving voice to those who have been neglected by Eurocentric academia, Italian state amnesia, and self-interested Western powers. In rupturing the silences around the genocide by making foci of the accounts of lived experiences, this rich text embarks on a mission to demystify the Western monopoly of history and knowledge production and shifts the lens to spaces and peoples whose histories and ways of knowing have not been accounted for.

In the first chapter, titled "Where are the Survivors?," Ahmida begins the task of uncovering a genocide that has largely escaped Western history books and scholarly discussions by describing the difficult and lengthy process he undertook to uncover untold stories and hidden archives. What intrigued me most in this chapter was Ahmida's deterrence away from legitimized government archives to draw attention and value to the unvalued and overlooked private archives hidden within the homes of those whose ancestors witnessed the terror of Italian colonialism. The ghost-like presence of these intimate archives in the private and familial setting ruptures the systemic silences by serving as living, communally protected and accepted evidence of the *shar* of Italian genocidal colonial policies in Libya. Moreover, Ahmida details his unorthodox experience of conducting participant interviews by capturing the essence of the postcolonial world, particularly

Libya's societal composition as being inherently communal. Ahmida remarks on how his interviews exemplified the continued living memory of the genocide within Libya's social fabric wherein family members and community members gathered and witnessed as the elderly survivors retold the horrors they saw.

In chapter two, titled "Eurocentricism, Silence, and Memory of Genocide," Ahmida continues to explore the silences around the genocide outside of Libya's social fabric. Particularly, Ahmida examines Western mainstream scholarly and political embellishments of Italian Fascism as lean and rehabilitative. Ahmida contests this dominant narrative by employing a postcolonial theoretical position to argue that the genocide was a deliberate and intentional act wherein Italian Fascists "played into Orientalist fantasies and racist and modernist colonial ideologies, about the dehumanized, backward natives, and the price of modernity to justify the need to 'exterminate all the brutes'" (p. 53). In making this argument, Ahmida then dedicates the remainder of chapter two as well as chapter three, titled "We Died because of *Shar*, Evil my Son", to rupture the Eurocentricism of scholarly and public perceptions that associate genocidal policies with those that occurred within spatial locality of Europe. Ahmida does this by elevating the poetry and oral stories of survivors which spoke of collective hardship in the camps through forced labour, torture, rape and murder, displacement and exile. These poems and survivor stories also expressed perseverance, hope and resistance despite the hardship. In centering the stories of survivors as a means by which to understand and uncover a brutal history of genocidal intent and action, these two chapters arguably serve as the most crucial aspects of the book by legitimizing the voices and ways of knowing of Libyans which have been deliberately overlooked and delegitimized. In doing so, Ahmida provides an opening for a discussion on and critique of Italian Fascist genocidal policies in Libya.

In chapter four, titled "After the Genocide", Ahmida revisits the global silences post-genocide, by examining the Cold War and the self-interest of the US and its allies in disregarding the brutality of Italian fascist genocidal policies to forge an alliance with Italy against the Soviet communists. Moreover, in this densely informative chapter, Ahmida goes on to trace the postcolonial Libyan state's responses and the differing social and political contexts in which the genocide is remembered and at times disregarded. Among the various analyses and discussions, Ahmida briefly mentions and strongly condemns Ita-

ly's 2008 ambiguous apology as devoid of a true intent for restoration and reparation. According to Ahmida, the apology does not attempt to break the silences around the genocide as it neglects to adequately correct the romanticized narrative of Italian history nor make an effort to restore the campsites as a means by which to recover the physical evidence of the atrocities.

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Chapter five, titled "Postscript: Rethinking Postcolonial State Formation, Crisis, and Collapse" is used by Ahmida to provide an overview of his calculated decision to provide a decolonized theory that centres the voices of those whose histories have been silenced and in doing so he attempts to depict them not as victims, but as agents "of living culture" (p. 148). He does so with the backdrop of criticism towards the Eurocentricism of political theory and its limiting ways of viewing the world through a Western lens. Moreover, Ahmida goes on to rupture Western Enlightenment constructs of static and linear historical time to provide a postcolonial analysis that examines the current crises of the Libyan state as directly rooted in the settler colonialism of Italy and the "contradictions that the modern Libyan state created in the shadow of settler colonialism" (p. 149). He argues that the return of anti-colonial symbols and memories during the Libyan revolution of 2011 can rupture European static temporal time and reveal the ways in which history is very much rooted in the present.

Through this exceptional text, Ahmida provides insightful, captivating and engaging arguments and discussions on the brutal realities of Italian Fascism's colonial genocidal policies and its afterlives by centering the perspectives of those who bear witnessed and kept the memory alive in Libya's social conscious. In taking a postcolonial theoretical standing and decolonial methodological approaches, Ahmida attempts to write history in ways that Western Eurocentric scholarship has often overlooked and delegitimized. This book serves as an enriched attempt to make the case for Italian colonial genocidal rule in Libya by making visible the five years of *shar* and the silenced voices that witnessed it. At times, this seemed like a large and hastened undertaking that ebbs and flows between ideas with little support from theoretical literature that engages in and builds on such ideas. As a result, a rushed and often lacking theoretical engagement of ideas and concepts left readers unable to fully digest and savor the complexities and richness of Ahmida's mission. While briefly drawing on critical scholarship that criticized Italian fascism, like that of Antonio Gramsci

and Hannah Arendt, as well as postcolonial anti-colonial scholarship, like that of Frantz Fanon, Ahmida does not construct a strong theoretical presence in the book, that not only allows for a better understanding of the colonial project in Libya but also the need to elevate other forms of knowledge to understand history holistically.

In line with this critique is the glaring anti-analysis of the role of women in keeping these memories alive. Throughout the book, Ahmida mentions in passing the ways in which women played a significant role both in his own recollection of the *shar* and its continued afterlife in the Libyan national fabric through the poetry of women survivors and women's transfer of such recollections in the everyday. In centering alternative methodologies, like that of oral tradition and poetry, Ahmida misses a great opportunity to grapple with and insert into his own analysis the works of feminist theoretical traditions that have explored how alternative transfers of knowledge, passed through women, have allowed for people to recollect outside of dominant ways of knowing.¹ Arguably, Ahmida's lack of theoretical rigor was intentional as this book is a preliminary introduction into understanding the Libyan genocide and its hidden history. After all, he concludes by stating (p. 174), "hopefully [this book] will not be read as the last word on the

1 Notably, the following sources in particular: Anna M. Agathangelou, "Making Anew an Arab Regional Order? On Poetry, Sex and Revolution," *Globalizations* 8/5 (2011), 581–594; Anna M. Agathangelou & Kyle D. Killian, "Epistemologies of Peace: Poetics, Globalization and the Social Justice Movement," *Globalizations* 3/4 (2006), 459–483; Patricia H. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Vol. 2), (New York: Routledge, 2000); Nokuthula Hlabangane, "Can Methodology Subvert the Logics of its Principal? Decolonial Mediations," *Persepectives on Science* 26/6 (2018), 658–693; bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra G. Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004), 153–159; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "Imperialism, History, Writing and Theory," in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, ed. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (London & New York: Zed Books, 2012), 57–90; Shaira Vadasaria, "Anti-Colonial poetics: A methodology from and for Palestine," in *Imaginative Inquiry: Innovative Approaches to Interdisciplinary Research*, ed. Curtis Fogel, Andrea Quinlan, & Elizabeth Quinlan (Washington, DC: Academica Press, 2013), 167–181.

Libyan genocide, but as a call for more research and examination of the hard questions and perhaps a decolonization of colonial and fascist knowledge and a decentering of genocide studies.”



