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The Aesthetics of *Ashlaa*: To Remember the Dismembered in Gaza

Bilal Hamamra, Aya Al-Asi, Hiba Daragmhah

Abstract

Drawing on, most notably, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian's writings on *ashlaa*' and Jacques Derrida's theory of trace, we analyze the aesthetics of *ashlaa*' in Gaza found in Palestinian literature. Beginning in 1948 and intensifying with the genocide that commenced in Gaza after October 7, 2023, dismembered body parts (*ashlaa*') have constituted a powerful motif in the works of Mahmoud Darwish, Edward Said, Ghassan Kanafani, Fadwa Tuqan, and many other contemporary Palestinian writers. We examine *ashlaa*' from both literal and metaphorical perspectives, as it offers both a critical register for reflecting the livability of this word in Palestinians' lives and a micropolitical and necropolitical regime of control of Gazans; it signals impending death, and renders human bodies and human artifacts torn and fragmented, what Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian has termed "necropolitical debris." The concept of *ashlaa*' extends to include architecture, ecology, land, and Palestinian identity, all of which Israeli occupation attempts to tear and even erase through the implementation of the biblical concept *Yemach Shemo*: 'may his name and memory be erased.' Thus, as Palestinians both within and outside Gaza attempt to reconstruct the bodies of the martyrs and bury them in a full form, they engage in resistance aimed at restoring Palestinian identity, sometimes physically by collecting the body parts, sometimes morally through gathering different pieces of writing to form one united text, such as this in our hand.

Keywords: *ashlaa*', death, dismemberment, genocide, identity, literature, micropolitics, necropolitics.

Introduction

Since the *Nakba* that launched Israeli settler-colonialism of Palestine in 1948, Palestinians have been subject to Israeli massacres, torture, arrests, displacement and genocide. However, the Gazacide, the Israeli genocide against Gazans that began on the 7th of October 2023, in response to Hamas' military attacks, has reached a death toll and a level of destruction of conditions of life that are of staggering disproportion to anything that has come before. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS 2025), Israel killed more than 53,339 Palestinians, 18,000 children, 12,400 women, 3,853 el-

derly, 214 journalists, 113 civil defense workers, in addition to the medical staff and paramedics, of whom 1,411 have been killed as of 20 May 2025. However, this figure is not fully accurate, since many Gazans are still missing: “[a]n additional 11,000 people remain unaccounted for—likely either missing or not yet found under rubble, according to the Palestinian health ministry” (Warnes *et al* 2025). According to PCBS, “11,200 individuals are missed.” While many Gazans remain under the rubble, many others have been transformed into *ashblaa'* (body parts): “A number of victims are still under the rubble and on the streets, and cannot be accessed” (Shurafa & Debre 2025). Also, there are 1.9 million people in Gaza who have been displaced from their houses multiple times, according to a UN official (2024).

We have collected and analyzed both fiction and non-fiction work, including many poems, elegies, personal stories, news, and articles written about the dismembered body parts of the Gazan people. We pay particular attention to works composed amid genocide, some written by Gazans and other Palestinians, others by non-Palestinian writers. Most of the works selected include specific use of the Arabic word “*ashblaa'*,” all include specific reference to the concept or general theme. We made these selections to show the suffering imposed upon the Palestinians in Gaza, who are cold-bloodedly bombed and turned into body parts, and to give mouth to the Gazans—those martyred, those who suffer bodily injury and dismemberment, and those denied the opportunity to express themselves before being turned into *ashblaa'*.

Our research explores the meaning of the word *ashblaa'* in Arabic, “dismembered body parts” in English. We have shaped our approach in a way that reflects the nature of the term, which signifies something scattered and incomplete: *ashblaa'* echoes the pain of being torn apart. To understand its full significance, we are tracking its occurrences across an extensive variety of literary works, searching for it in different contexts. These parts may seem unrelated, but together, they have the potential to form a more meaningful and complete image.

This article draws on Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s article, “*Ashblaa'* and the Genocide in Gaza, Livability against Fragmented Flesh,” that examines the politically charged term, *ashblaa'*, analytically from the point of view of Palestinians. However, our research engages with the aesthetics of *ashblaa'* from a literary point of view. The concept of *ashblaa'* requires a philosophical vocabulary capable of holding together bodily destruction, spatial fragmentation, and the persistence of memory after attempted erasure. We read *ashblaa'* as a palimpsestic concept: a layered site of inscription where violence attempts to overwrite Palestinian presence, yet where traces of the erased remain legible. A palimpsest does not simply replace one text with another; it preserves the pressure of what has been effaced beneath what has been newly imposed. Jacques Derrida’s (1976) thinking of the trace is useful here because the trace names what survives within erasure, what remains legible even after an attempt to efface presence. In the Palestinian context, Israeli colonial violence writes itself upon bodies, houses, villages, landscapes, archives, and names by tearing them apart, dispersing them, or rendering them unrecognizable. Yet this inscription never fully

succeeds in producing disappearance. The fragment remains a trace. Michel Foucault's (1972; 1977/1995) account of power as something exercised upon bodies, spaces, and discourses further illuminates how colonial authority inscribes itself materially upon Palestinian life. Judith Butler's (2004; 2009) reflections on vulnerability and grievability also clarify how violence operates not only by killing, but by determining whose bodies can be recognized, mourned, counted, and remembered. Read through these theoretical coordinates, *ashlaa*' names both the violent fragmentation of Palestinian bodies and land and the counter-practice through which Palestinians gather fragments into memory, literature, and resistance. The impetus of this research lies in the fact that this word has received much media coverage during the Israeli genocide against the Gaza Strip, a genocide that has transformed the strip into *ashlaa*'. Israeli military forces have destroyed 79% of the mosques, 3 churches (Anadolu Agency 2025), and at least 36 hospitals (ALJAZEERA 2025) in the Gaza strip. *Ashlaa*', in Palestinian literature, refers not only to dismembered body parts but also to parts of what was architecture: "After more than 15 months of Israel's war on Gaza nearly 70 percent of all structures in the Strip have been destroyed or damaged, along with 92 percent of all housing units" (Doctors without Borders 2025). Israel targets houses. The Palestinian national poet Mahmoud Darwish points to the house in his prose poem "The House as Causality": "the house as casualty is also mass murder, even if it is empty of its inhabitants" and "houses are killed just like their inhabitants" (2024). The house here is rendered as a someone who witnesses the destruction and is murdered.

Palestinian poet Omar Zayadeh points to the destruction of animals in his poem "I Do not Know my *Ashlaa*"; nor Anyone Knows His":

Horses... the *ashlaa*' of horses

birds... the *ashlaa*' of birds

cats... the *ashlaa*' of cats

and carts drawn by donkeys

nothing of which survived.

(2023, lines 18-22)

خيول... أشلاء خيول،

طيور... أشلاء طيور،

قطط... أشلاء قطط،

وعربات تجرها الحمير

- ما نجا منها -

The repetition of “*ashblaa*’” emphasizes the fact that each type of animal has been fragmented, with no exception. The lines are laid out in a fragmented form, leaving spaces for ... bodies disappeared that nothing is known about. As Al-Gherbawi (2024) states:

Gaza's animals have also not been spared. Animals in captivity, on farms, in shelters and in homes have been killed or wounded in the Israeli strikes or displaced, according to several local and international organizations. Others have gone missing. Like Gaza's population, the animals that survive are suffering from the lack of food and medicine due to the Israeli blockade of the enclave.

Animals in Gaza witness *ashblaa*': killed and torn to pieces, starved, suffering from diseases, no access to care. The shortage of medical tools and doctors means Gazan people can barely be treated: “[T]here were at least 136 strikes on at least 27 hospitals and 12 other medical facilities, claiming significant casualties among doctors, nurses, medics and other civilians and causing significant damage” (UN 2024).

The aesthetics of *ashblaa*’ in Palestinian literature includes playing the role of the moral witness to the brutal Israeli practices and the massacres of the Palestinians. So Palestinian poet Hanna Abu-Hanaa’s poem “The Cry of the Wounds” (1969, lines 12-15), written two years after the Kafr Qasim massacre:

The evening still trembles at the horror of that massacre
Scenes of tragedies, engraved in my eyes by bullets
Heaps of torn limbs, gaping with blood, dust-covered
Quivering like birds, slaughtered, stumbling.

ما زال يرتعد المساء لهول ذكرى المجزرة
صور المآسي بالرصاص بمقتليه مصوره
كتل من الأشلاء فاغرة الدماء معفّره
متوّنّيات كالطيور ذبيحة متعثره

The poet offers witness to massacres by way of fragmented experiences, things that cannot be fully seen with the eye. A dark evening atmosphere. Bullets interrupting his field of vision for the events unfolding. Scenes here become incomplete, disrupted, like Palestinian bodies.

Palestinian author and politician Ghassan Kanafani's body was rendered *ashlaa*' in 1972, when Israeli agents put a grenade in Kanafani's car, exploding it, killing him instantly and distributing his *ashlaa*' on the trees:

The dismembered body of a 36-year-old man, scattered across the trees, and the charred body of a child lying 20 meters away from a car that had just exploded... This was the final scene of the life of the Palestinian writer and activist, Ghassan Kanafani, who was assassinated by the Israeli Mossad on July 8, 1972, in a car bomb explosion in Beirut, Lebanon. He was accompanied by his niece, Lamis Najm. (Al-Abdallah 2013)

Um Maron, one of the witnesses to the tragic incident, explains that people gathered Kanafani's *ashlaa*' from the trees, and they found his arm on a roof of a building, with a wristwatch still ticking (Nostalgia 2020). The trees held Kanafani's *ashlaa*'. The poet valued trees, symbols for rootedness and endurance in his work: "I shall go on fighting to reclaim my homeland, for it is my right, my memory, and the only future I dream of. There awaits me a tree and a drifting cloud, a tender shade, a sun ablaze, clouds that pour forth life, and roots too ancient, too defiant to be torn from the earth" (Kanafani 1992, 45).

Darwish, in response to the Israeli assault on Kanafani, comments: "O Palestinians. Beware of natural death! This is the only language we found among Ghassan Kanafani's flesh" (2015). Darwish articulates killing, turning the body into pieces (necropolitical language, the kind Palestinians are forced to speak in the conditions of violence wrought by settler colonialism). Darwish compares Kanafani's body with the Palestinian national body in his lamentation: "we carried you in a bag and put you in a funeral accompanied by bad songs, just as we carried the homeland in a bag and put it in a funeral that has not yet ended, accompanied by bad songs. How much the homeland resembles you! And how much you resemble the homeland!" (2015). Kanafani's fragmentation is a continuation of Palestine's:

the differences between bodies and homelands disappear—and everyone is in one bag ...; your remains are not pieces of scattered, burning flesh. They are Acre, Haifa, Jerusalem, Tiberias, and Jaffa. Blessed is the body that scatters into cities. And no Palestinian will be Palestinian if he does not gather his flesh from the wind, the roofs of neighbors' houses, and the investigation files to heal the remains. (Darwish 2015)

Every part of Kanafani's body and of the body of Palestine, represents a city separated from the other by occupation. Darwish stresses in his lamentation over the scattering of Kanafani's identity, scattered by the scattering of his body: "what's your name now? Nothing... nothing. My name is scattered among my remains. When you find my remains, you will find my name" (2015). Kanafani's targeting and assassination aimed at removing his identity as a Palestinian and a writer; Kanafani's demand to be collected reflects his insistence on maintaining his identity and his never-ending resistance against brutal occupation.

Darwish refers to *ashblaa'* in many of his literary works. In "The House as Casualty," Darwish describes the dismembering of objects under the bombardment of war:

And the memory of objects is killed: stone, wood, glass, iron, cement are **scattered in broken fragments** like living beings. And cotton, silk, linen, papers, books are torn to pieces like proscribed words. Plates, spoons, toys, records, taps, pipes, door handles, fridges, washing machines, flower vases, jars of olives and pickles, tinned food all break just like their owners. Salt, sugar, spices, boxes of matches, pills, contraceptives, antidepressants, strings of garlic, onions, tomatoes, dried okra, rice and lentils are crushed to pieces just like their owners. Rent agreements, marriage documents, birth certificates, water and electricity bills, identity cards, passports, love letters are torn to shreds like their owners' hearts. Photographs, toothbrushes, combs, cosmetics, shoes, underwear, sheets, towels fly in every direction like family secrets broadcast aloud in the devastation. (2024)

The phrase 'scattered in broken fragments' is originally written as *ashblaa'* in the source text, 'تنتثر أشلاء'. The devastation extends to inanimate objects.

The concept of *ashblaa'* has been a motif in Palestinian writings since 1948. Consider the speech by Gazan poet and writer Mosab Abu Toha: "a writer must speak on behalf of the unheard, those who cannot articulate well what they feel or see, and most importantly to me, those who lost their lives under the rubble of vicious wars" (2022). *Ashblaa'* refer to dismembered body parts but also the fragmentation of the Palestinian people, their land, and their collective identity. The Jordanian scholar Tahrir Hamdi states that imagining Palestine is a nonstop process of "constructing/reconstructing a collective, inclusive, national, and cultural identity" (2022, 14). Palestinian identity is kept alive by the continuous process of imagining; without it, the Palestinian identity would collapse. As'ad, a researcher at the Institute for Palestine Studies (2023), reports that the "blood and the dismembered bodies of children" have become "the most dominant image in Gaza." Such catastrophic scenes happen daily and frequently, until they become the norm. "Do not get used to the scene" (Nour 2024) is one of the most prevalent sayings in social media during this Gazan genocide.

The concept of *ashblaa'* has been employed metaphorically in Palestinian literature to depict the fragmentation, scattering, and pain of Palestinian people. A Palestinian child from Gaza, Abdullah Abu Sultan, titled his first novel *Ashblaa'* and claimed such would not end until the ongoing war of Gaza ends. The name *Ashblaa'* here does not indicate dismembered body parts in the literal sense but "the situation of a mother who lost her child, whose heart was shattered and turned into *ashblaa'*, and the [Palestinian] society that was displaced by the Israeli aggression and became *ashblaa'*" (Arabi 21, 2023). The living Gazans, not the dead, are torn into pieces by sadness following the loss of their loved ones. One of the famous sayings during the genocide is that "the one who died survived and those who are alive are the ones dying."

Ashlaa' also stands for Palestinian society divided and displaced. The Palestinian-American critic Edward Said explained the fragmentation Palestinian society suffers in his book *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*:

Its style and method—the interplay of text and images, the mixture of genres, modes, and styles—do not tell a consecutive story, nor do they constitute a political essay. Since the main features of our present existence are dispossession, dispersion, and yet also a kind of power income-mensurate with our stateless exile, I believe that essentially unconventional, hybrid, and fragmentary forms of expression should be used to represent us. (1999, 6)

Fragmentary forms of expression represent the Palestinians since Palestinian existence is scattered, diasporic. Gaza is itself today scattered and fragmented into parts: Beit Hanoun, Deir al Balah, Gaza City, Jabalia, Khan Younis, and Rafah. Atif Abu Bakir (2019, lines 20-23), a Palestinian poet, writes in his “Rafah city” about the fragmentation of Rafah:

Rafah — a heart split in two,

divided between two lands.

Its blood runs through a single vein and arteries,

making people brothers in both halves.

Rafah is divided between two nations: Palestine and Egypt. Rafah constitutes one place with the same blood running through it; however, it is divided, scattered.

Palestine itself is divided into *ashlaa'*, fragmented between the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the 1948 territories: “Palestinians are a single, united people. Yet Israel’s actions aim to fragment and divide them across Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the rest of historic Palestine” (The Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy 2025). The apartheid wall Israelis built that separates 1948 occupied lands from the West Bank has turned Palestine into *ashlaa'*: “Erecting the barrier within this framework is one more tool for Israel’s ‘divide and rule’ policy, as a result of which Palestinian Jerusalem has been shattered to pieces” (Ir Amim, n.d.). This wall is a physical entity causing fragmentation, but a psychological one at the same time, causing social fragmentation between Palestinians. Relations among Palestinians have become weaker: “Socially, the checkpoints have deprived families and relatives of the ability to connect with one another, creating a gap in social relationships that cannot be bridged by phone calls or electronic communication” (Asa’d 2023). In the West Bank, Zionists imposed many checkpoints among the Palestinian cities to hinder Palestinians’ movement from one place to another: “The Israeli occupation has established a total of 849 checkpoints across the occupied West Bank, with gates blocking roads constituting a third of these obstacles, most of them are frequently closed” (Middle East Monitor 2025).

Under the weight of the physical barriers the Israeli occupation is increasingly erecting, Palestinian social norms are reshaping; some Palestinians now avoid marrying someone from another town just for the fear of the checkpoints. One Jerusalemite mother expressed her feelings as follows:

I prefer that my daughter's groom holds a Jerusalem ID, because it's difficult to apply for family unification if he has a West Bank ID. It's also hard for my daughter to live in the West Bank after marriage, as she could lose her residency in Jerusalem. The consequences are severe, it would become hard for her to visit us or even her own children in the future. (Saadah 2018)

It takes hours to travel a short distance that, without checkpoints, takes 20 minutes. Abdullah Fauzi, a banker from the northern West Bank city of Nablus, "used to take an hour" to get to work, "until Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023" when Israeli military "diverted its residents through seven new checkpoints, doubling Fauzi's time on the road" and since the ceasefire in Gaza, "it's gotten worse" (Debre 2025) as Fauzi's drive takes at least four hours now. A route that usually took no more than 20 minutes has become 4 hours. And the passage through checkpoints is often torturous and absurd.¹ As if Palestinians are awaiting their death at these checkpoints. These obstacles and separations turn Palestine and Palestinians into living *ashlaa*'.

The checkpoint permit system, in conjunction with the division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, has a profound impact, not only on physically carving up the territory but also on dividing Palestinian families, as evidenced in Israeli policy regarding residency permits for West Bank Palestinian residents for the Gaza Strip (Arel 2024). These physical barriers are deliberate colonial tactics and systematic political tools: "The destruction of cities like Jenin and Tulkarem, the suffocation of Gaza, and the increasing settler violence all serve to dismantle Palestinian political, social, and territorial continuity. By depopulating these areas, Israel seeks to make Palestinian self-determination impossible" (The Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy 2025). Through such strategies, Zionist occupation works to weaken the unity of social, familial, and political ties and turn a once-cohesive society into a map of isolated *ashlaa*'.

Displacement itself is an act of dismemberment—rendering of *ashlaa*'—as Palestinians are scattered in different places. The Palestinian poet Fadwa Tuqan (2019, lines 61-62), in "Across the Distance, I Wish I Could Fly," describes the situation of diaspora in which Palestinians live: "don't ask when and how/ the tale of diaspora and loss will end," as this dilemma of Palestinians' displacement will never end as long as the Israeli occupation continues. In *Palestinians Worldwide: A Demographic Study*, Courgobe and Nofal (2020) describe how Palestinians are scattered across almost 200 countries, including Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Gulf countries, and many other Arab and non-Arab countries. Said, introducing the Chilean writer Lina Meruane's book, *Volverse palestina* (Becoming Palestine): "it's somehow the fate of Palestinians not to end where they started but somewhere unexpected and far away" (2013, 10).

Palestinians have started using *ashlaa*' in their songs, since they have begun to believe that *ashlaa*' are a symbol for resistance: "even the intestines there re-

sist, even the *ashlaa'*, and even the fetus” “حتى الأمعاء هناك تقاوم، حتى الأشلاء حتى” (Azar 2025, 1:36). The motif of *ashlaa'* has become a motif of resistance.

The Palestinian poet Ibtisam Sadeh (2019, lines 61-62) stresses the notion of identity in her poem “Similar *Ashlaa'*”:

Collect the letters of your name
that you engraved on a place on your body
so, you won't be buried anonymously
without an identity.

Palestinians recognize the *ashlaa'* of their beloved ones from various signs: for example, “a young woman identified her mother’s *ashlaa'* from the ring on the hand; a child’s *ashlaa'* were identified from his pajamas; a brother’s *ashlaa'* were identified by the car keys in his hand; and an uncle’s *ashlaa'* were identified by the kidney dialysis tube still in his arm” (Shaloub-Kevorkian 2024).



Figures 1-4: Palestinians searching for the *ashlaa'* of their families (Palestinechannel, 2025)

Gazans have started writing their names on their hands so others may recognize their identity after their death. Ahmed Abu Sab’h, a father of children in Al-Shifa Hospital, told Aljazeera Net that, “we write our names and the names of our children on our wrists, so that our corpses may be identified if we are hit by Israeli warplanes” (Palestine Chronicle Staff 2023). Israel’s attempted erasure of Palestine and Palestinians extends to the intentional destruction and

erasure of *ashblaa'*, destroyed pieces. Israel uses internationally prohibited weapons against Palestinians in Gaza, as “based on verified video and witness accounts that Israeli forces used white phosphorus in military operations in Lebanon and Gaza” (Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2023). According to Madsen (2024), white phosphorus, which is internationally prohibited, causes significant damage to the human body: it burns the skin and internal tissues. One report states: “At least 7,820 bodies were not registered by the Ministry of Health because they never reached hospitals, having either vaporized or melted as a result of the occupation’s deadly missiles and bombs” (Saleh 2025).

The palimpsestic force of *ashblaa'* lies in this double inscription. The first inscription is colonial: the body is torn, the house is demolished, the village is renamed, the archive is damaged, the grave is disturbed, movement is obstructed, and the land is divided into isolated zones. This is the writing of violence upon Palestinian bodies and upon the body of Palestine itself. Such writing is not metaphorical only; it recalls Foucault’s (1977/1995) insistence that power acts directly upon bodies, organizes space, produces visibility, and regulates the conditions under which bodies appear as governable objects. The second inscription is Palestinian: families collect the remains of their loved ones, identify them through rings, clothes, scars, keys, or bodily signs, write names on wrists, preserve testimonies, and transform scattered remains into literary and political memory. Fragmentation itself is not resistance; it is the wound imposed by colonial power. Resistance begins when the fragment is refused as final, when the torn body is named, gathered, mourned, narrated, and restored to the collective memory of a people. In this sense, *ashblaa'* become a counter-palimpsest: the colonial inscription of erasure is overwritten by practices of naming, witnessing, mourning, and remembrance (Derrida 1976; Butler 2004; 2009).

Micropolitics in the Palestinian context refers to Israel’s attempts to control Palestinians’ behavior, of the living and the dead. According to Foucault (1972, 223): “The production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures.” The body functions as a medium between power and discourse (Manaa 2025). The body carries the discourse produced by the power system. Discourse articulated through the power system of Israel is inscribed on Palestinian bodies, imposing control over them and transforming them into pieces of flesh. Israel’s decomposition of the Palestinians facilitates further their domination through the writing of colonial discourse on their bodies. Israel employs ‘divide and conquer’ techniques that “involve causing division among individuals to weaken them, making them easier to manipulate or control, or possibly giving the manipulator a leg up on competition” (O’Connor 2023). Lyford further supports this notion by emphasizing that there is “a grammar of the human body that parsed the human form into pieces that could be manipulated for aesthetic purpose just as words and parts of speech were mobilized in the process of poetic construction” (2000, 51). Palestinian bodies become text, deconstructed and transformed into parts (words). A Palestinian Civil Defense Worker named Rami Dababesh states that “[w]e’ve extracted martyrs, many of whom are decomposed and completely unidentifiable *ashblaa'*... We’ve found corpses of women,

children and individuals without heads as well as torn body parts" (quoted in Knell & Abu Alouf 2024).

Micropolitics, in the Gazans' dictionary, is defined differently from what's seen in other societies: social surveillance, gender expectations, and favoritism. In Gaza, micropolitics means brutal, oppressive, invasive, and systemic control over Gazans' bodies and lives. The situation is more than the bombing of Gazans' bodies, turning them into *ashlaa*'; it is the continual and slow bombing and disintegration of lives and souls. Gazans suffer from lack of water, medicine, food, and electricity. Gazans cannot move freely; there are checkpoints everywhere. Speaking your language or showing your identity is punishable. Khalil Al-Halabi, a water desalination station owner in Gaza City, states:

Electricity is a basic source of life. With electricity, everything is available for human beings. Today, after returning from the south, I began repairing my water station from some of the destruction it suffered. It is possible to operate it and provide potable water, but the major problem is the lack of electricity to run the desalination devices. (Quoted in Abdelhadi 2025)

These details are forms of daily micropolitical violence that strip the body and render it feeble, vulnerable and fragile long before death arrives. Gazans are targeted by weapons, but they are also dismantled through manipulation of ordinary basics and needs, until they begin to be fractured, thin, and at risk of vanishing: "Israel is implementing starvation policies against Palestinian civilians as a method of warfare" (FRANCE 24, 2024). The hunger of Palestinians is imposed by Israel but becomes a weapon Palestinians use to resist and prove their existence, especially when implemented by the detainees in Israeli prisons "to protest the harsh measures implemented by the Israeli authorities" (Mushtaha 2023).

Gazans' *ashlaa*' demonstrate a calculated embodiment of the political control imposed by the Israeli occupation. The occupation exerts power over life and death; it prevents access to hospitals, the entry of medicine and medical tools, and regulates which corpses are retrieved and buried. For example,

On October 13, 2023, Al-Durra Children's Hospital was targeted by Israeli forces with white phosphorus shells, prompting doctors to evacuate the hospital of wounded and sick patients; ...the Jordanian field hospital was damaged due to Israeli shelling, disrupting the delivery of healthcare to those affected; [and an] Israeli airstrike targeted Al-Quds Hospital, which was sheltering hundreds of displaced families. (Mwa-tana for Human Rights 2023)

Bureaucratic decisions function micropolitically to dismantle Gazans' bodies, physically and symbolically. Most of the time in Gaza, martyrs are buried in fragments:

Some of the bodies are severely mutilated, and only the relatives of those who have been identified or reported missing are able to claim them for burial and have them included in the death toll announced by the Ministry of Health in

Gaza during the war. However, the remaining bodies often remain stacked in the morgue's refrigerator for weeks at a time. (Sky News Arabia 2023)

The result could be termed “fragmented memory”: where a Gazan mother may recall the hand or the leg of her child that was found, or a Gazan father recognizes his daughter/son through a disfigured face. In this context, the *ashblaa'* are a metaphor for the fractured nation: a body without hands reflects a resistance suppressed, a headless corpse suggests leadership, and a corpse without a heart becomes a nation devoid of emotions; “surreality will be in any case a function of our willingness to completely defamiliarize everything... right up to the point of defamiliarizing a hand by isolating it from an arm” (Breton 1956, 3). Palestinians' identities are reconfigured into and through their *'ashblaa'*, yielding “fragmented Pain,” a form of continuous suffering, intimate and deeply embedded in the minutiae of daily violence.

Israel controls Palestinians' lives and deaths. Israel forces Palestinians to exist in a state between life and death, where they are neither alive nor fully dead. Necropolitics: how bodies are treated like the walking dead (Gržinić & Tasić 2023). Necropolitics is about controlling people's deaths. In the case of Gazans, the Israeli occupation has used necropolitics meticulously, starting from general control and moving step by step to specific control. The first and the most general control is the occupation itself. Then, the catastrophic war of October 7 comes, representing an aggressive method of controlling death in besieging Gaza and blocking water, food, medicine and healthcare from entering. The former Minister of Israel Defense Yoav Gallant says: “we are imposing a complete siege on the Gaza Strip—no electricity, no food, no water, no gas... everything is closed” (FRANCE 24, 2023). The Israeli occupation is a genocide against Gaza.

The politics of death dictates who lives and who must die, according to Cameroonian historian Achille Mbembe. However, in the Gazan context of bombing, killing, and constant dehumanization, the politics of death has shifted from the matter of who lives and who dies to the issue of who is lucky enough to be granted a normal death and who is not so lucky and dies inhumanly. Villar, in “Death as Policy: Understanding Necropolitics in Gaza and Beyond,” states that “Palestinians are not even considered human enough to die” (2024). Israel treats Palestinians as animals, stripping them of their humanity. The same Gallant stated, during the genocide: “[w]e are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly” (FRANCE 24 2023). This animal imagery is shown when Palestinians are “hastily buried without proper funeral rites, often in mass graves. Even the buried are not spared, as Israeli forces have destroyed cemeteries, dug up graves, and confiscated bodies. Similar incidents have occurred in hospitals, where the bodies of deceased patients have been seized” (Villar 2024). Palestinians are not safe even after death as their bodies are vulnerable to being destroyed and turned into *ashblaa'*. Bodies are seized and confiscated by Israel for other, future purposes. For instance, “the body of Hamas Leader Yahya Sinwar could be used as a ‘bargaining chip’ to secure the release of hostages from Gaza captivity, Israeli sources told CNN on Saturday” (*The Jerusalem Post*

2024). Some bodies, when torn into scattered pieces of flesh, are collected in bags: "they [Gazans] were collected and placed in bags, ... the amount of remains was very large ... seventy kilograms for an adult, and eighteen for a child" (Abdel Fattah 2024). Such behaviour shows again the animal-like treatment Palestinians receive from Israel, their flesh treated like meat.

Gazans fear being torn into *ashlaa*', vanishing without a trace, without a burial, and without being recognized. This fear clarifies the dual position of *ashlaa*' in Palestinian experience and literature. In its first meaning, *ashlaa*' names the violence inflicted by Israel: the tearing of bodies, the scattering of remains, the destruction of homes, the breaking of land into isolated zones, and the attempted erasure of names, graves, and memories. In this sense, *ashlaa*' are not resistance; they are the material result of colonial and necropolitical violence (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2024). Yet the term acquires a second meaning when Palestinians refuse to leave the fragments as fragments. When families search for remains, identify them, write names on wrists, bury the dead, preserve testimonies, and turn scattered bodies into poems, elegies, narratives, and archives, *ashlaa*' become a site of resistance against disappearance, since mourning and public recognition are political acts in contexts where certain lives are denied grievability (Butler 2004; 2009). Resistance, therefore, does not reside in dismemberment itself, but in the Palestinian acts of gathering, naming, mourning, narrating, and remembering that contest the erasure produced by dismemberment.

The same dual meaning applies to land and to the collective body of the Palestinian people. Israel fragments Palestine, through siege, checkpoints, walls, borders, bombardment, displacement, settlement expansion, the destruction of homes, and the separation of Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem, the 1948 territories, refugee camps, prisons, and exile, producing geographic, political, and social discontinuities that have long shaped Palestinian collective life (Said 1999; Hamdi 2022; Amnesty International 2023). These are not only geographic divisions; they are forms of collective dismemberment. The Palestinian people are made to appear as scattered parts rather than as one political and historical body, even though Palestinian cultural production has repeatedly worked to reconstruct collective identity across exile, occupation, and territorial division (Said 1999; Hamdi 2022). Palestinian literature resists this fragmentation by gathering these dispersed parts into relation, insisting that Gaza is not separate from Jerusalem, that the body is not separate from the land, and that the dead are not separate from the living memory of the people. *Ashlaa*' therefore name both the fragmentation of individual bodies and the attempted fragmentation of the collective body of Palestine.

Ibrahim Al Ghoula, a young Gazan active on social media, draws his humble wish saying:

I don't want to end up in a bag. I can give up everything, except my death. I want a full shroud, 192 cm long. I won't give up my body; I want it whole. I want my arms, my legs, my heart, my head, my twenty fingers, and my eyes too. I want to return to the womb of the earth, just as I was created from it, this same earth, here in this land. I don't mind being buried in a mass grave, but I

want my name on a marker, and my age too, and to be known as someone from this slaughtered homeland. I deeply wish, with all the bitterness in my heart, that my grave be in an actual cemetery, not on a street, not on a sidewalk, or anywhere else. That is my final wish. It is my right. (Jamal 2024)

This Gazan boy is missing being treated as a human being, missing being hugged by someone, even if it is the womb of the earth. This missing can be attributed to the loss he is suffering, which left no one beside him apart from his mother earth. The Gazan poet and author Maryam Qawash describes such a fate during the Gazan genocide in one of her masterpieces:

Under the dim, stingy lamp, the three of us sat talking. "If you could choose the missile that would hit you to pass to the afterlife," one of us asked, "which one would you choose?" The first laughed for a long time, waving his hands and saying: "I want it small, just my size... I don't want it to tear me into scattered continents and islands. I want it — just a quick collision..." Then he raised his hands—mockingly—"and just like that, I'll fly faster to the sky." We laughed long and hard. Then the second said, "As for me! I want it heavy! So that the heaps of rubble would bury me, and at least I'd have a grave, even if made of rubble. I don't want stray dogs to gnaw at my body, nor do I want my corpse to swell at the edge of the roads, offending passersby..." I said, half-joking and half-serious: "I want that new missile... I heard they've invented missiles that vaporize people. As bold as I am in life, I'm too shy for my body to be scattered in death. I want my body to evaporate—un-seen, unfound. (2024)

The dim light reflects the state of Palestinians being unseen by Arab nations. Their speech about death and missiles is marginalized, not even listened or paid attention to. Death imposes its presence and is absorbed by each Palestinian. Inescapable, yet with the illusion of choosing the missile that would mark the end. These lines show the strong, unconscious desire to be buried respectfully and have a grave: "For many Palestinians trying to grieve and bury their slain loved ones, a complete body, if any at all, is a luxury many are not afforded" (Abu-Sittah 2024). The pieces of flesh are the only evidence of the existence of their beloved ones. For 1948 Palestinians the 'return key' is similar: often the only piece of evidence of their existence in Palestine.

The idea of nonhuman or inhuman death is shown in the story of Lena, a Gazan girl, who addresses her cat during the genocide as if it were a human being: "I beg you not to eat us when we die... please... if you stay alive after we die... don't eat us"(Al Jazeera 2024). The Palestinian girl here is not concerned about whether she will die or stay alive as she takes 'being dead' for granted, but she is concerned about whether her cat will give her the opportunity to die normally, or if it will turn her into *ashlaa*'.

Identity is not spared in Israel's drive to turn Palestine into *ashlaa*'. Israelis use their religious biblical term *yemach shemo* (which means "[e]rased shall be his name and his memory" (Spitz 2012)) as a symbolic method of identity purification, erasing the unworthy from collective memory. This curse is considered the worst one in Judaism and was used against Jews and non-Jews as the highest

level of condemnation. However, today it is only applied to Palestinians: “This phrase can be linked to the process of killing Palestinians and dismembering their bodies using Israeli killing machines, which results in their being rendered faceless and buried without identification” (Manna 2025). The history of this curse is biblical. It traces back to the old Persian Empire when Haman, a proud man who worked under king Ahasuerus, ordered the execution of all Jews in the empire. This curse has been employed against Palestinians since 1948. Ghānim states that “after the Zionists expelled the inhabitants from their villages and homes, they usually demolished the houses, razed them to the ground, and erased the names of the villages from the maps and records” (2013, 119).

Hamdi emphasizes that the loss Palestinians encounter is not only about “loss of space, but also the loss of its name [Palestine] on the map and the names of its villages and towns in 1948” (2017, 249). The name is the signifier that stands for the signified, which is in this case the names of the villages. Ghānim points out that “a person without a name is indefinite but with neither name nor memory is not there anymore” (2013, 119). The erasure of both name and memory is what Israel has done and continues to do in Palestine. It is not enough to erase the names of the villages, it seems, as they also attempt to erase the memories of those names by completely altering them. Turning human beings into *ashlaa*’ means erasing the names. Erasing names is intensified by erasing memories. The concept of ‘memoricide’ covers Israel’s massacring of Palestinian bodies and their cutting into *ashlaa*’. Memoricide is a technique Israel uses to remove Palestinian identity. Literally, it means ‘the killing of memories.’ This concept “is more than the destruction of world-famous archives, monuments and World Heritage sites during times of war and violent conflict. Memoricide has social and discursive dimensions ...[since it] may also target the memory of a person, a place, a group or event” (Webster 2023, 409, 413). The dismemberment of Palestinians’ bodies makes it difficult for their relatives to recognize them; “the spokesperson for forensic services in the Gaza Strip, Mahmoud Ashour, on Saturday called for serious international pressure on the Israeli enemy to allow the immediate entry of essential technical and forensic equipment,” so it becomes possible to “identify the remains of hundreds of martyrs who are still unidentified” (Saba News Agency 2026).

One way Palestinians retrieve their stolen humanity is by collecting, organizing, and reconstructing their torn bodies and pieces (*ashlaa*’) into a full form: “The process of reconstructing and recognizing these remains represents a process of reviving names and identities, as the Palestinian presence is re-acknowledged, and the memory of the martyrs is immortalized by reclaiming their identity and rejecting their erasure” (Manna 2025). Spitz describes “erasure” as “nothing less than the cutting off of a soul. Every human has a soul. That soul is a divine spark, the eternal part of his being, his personality, that will survive long after his body has turned to dust” (2012).

This essay has examined the aesthetics of *ashlaa*’ in Palestinian literature by collecting, analyzing, and connecting literary works that represent dismembered body parts, fragmented land, shattered homes, displaced communities, and wounded memory. To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has

brought together such works through a sustained analysis of the word *ashblaa'* and its literary, political, and philosophical implications. The essay has shown that, in Palestinian literature, to speak of *ashblaa'* is to speak not only of death, but also of the endurance of meaning beyond extermination and annihilation. *Ashblaa'* attain a spectral ontology: they linger, return, and refuse finality. They are more than bodily fragments; they are traces of lives, names, places, and histories that colonial violence attempts to erase but cannot fully extinguish. In this sense, *ashblaa'* should be understood not only as the outcome of violent fragmentation, but also as a palimpsestic site where the struggle between erasure and remembrance is continually inscribed.

Palestinian *ashblaa'* speak forcefully because they reject obliteration from within the very condition of fragmentation. Rather than fading, they proliferate and become uncontainable through collective memory, mourning, testimony, and literature. A palimpsest is “a manuscript or piece of writing material on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing” (Oxford n.d.). Palestinian *ashblaa'* can be read as a living palimpsest, a layered archive in which violence, pain, memory, and resistance are inscribed upon the body and upon the land. This does not mean that fragmentation itself is resistant. The distinction is crucial: Israel produces *ashblaa'* through the violent dismemberment of bodies, homes, land, graves, archives, and collective life; Palestinians transform *ashblaa'* into sites of resistance when they gather, name, mourn, narrate, bury, and preserve the fragments against disappearance. The first inscription is colonial: bodies are torn, homes are demolished, villages are renamed, archives are damaged, graves are disturbed, and the land is divided into isolated fragments. The second inscription is Palestinian: the fragments are collected, named, mourned, narrated, buried, and restored to collective memory. Fragmentation itself is not resistance; it is the wound imposed by colonial power. Resistance begins when the fragment is refused as final. The *ashblaa'* will therefore never be just torn body parts; they are continuous memories that resist the complete erasure promised by Zionism.

This palimpsestic reading is supported by Derrida's thinking of trace and erasure. As one study explains, “the concepts of ‘erasure’ and ‘trace’ in Derrida's writing set up the notion of the palimpsest” (University of Pretoria n.d., 24). The palimpsest “provide[s] a model for the function of writing” because it shows that writing always takes place in the presence of other writings and that meaning is deferred through layered traces rather than fixed in a single origin (Ferreira-Meyers 2008, 204–14). Derrida's (1976) notion of the trace helps clarify why *ashblaa'* continue to signify beyond destruction: the fragment bears the mark of what violence seeks to remove, and the attempt at erasure leaves behind the very trace it tries to abolish.

Foucault's (1972; 1977/1995) understanding of power further clarifies how bodies and spaces become surfaces of political inscription, since power works not only through killing but also through organizing visibility, movement, discipline, and discourse. Butler's (2004; 2009) work on vulnerability and grievability also illuminates the struggle over whose bodies are recognized, counted, mourned, and remembered. Through these theoretical coordinates, Palestinian *ash-*

laa' act as a palimpsest that holds living memories of resistance and historical bodies.

What is ultimately at stake is not only the fragmentation of individual bodies, but also the fragmentation of the collective body of Palestine. Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem, the 1948 territories, refugee camps, prisons, checkpoints, borders, and exile are made to function as scattered parts of a wounded national body. **This is the collective dimension of *ashlaa'*: the Palestinian people are targeted not only as separate bodies, but as a political, historical, territorial, and mnemonic body whose continuity is subjected to fragmentation.** Yet Palestinian literature gathers these dispersed parts into relation. It reassembles what colonial violence attempts to scatter. It gives form to what is meant to remain anonymous. It restores names where erasure seeks namelessness. In other words, *ashlaa'* can be reconstructed into verses, testimonies, elegies, memories, and archives, turning pain into symbolic and political power. The reconstruction of *ashlaa'* becomes an act of dignity and defiance, whether this reconstruction is physical, narrative, symbolic, or political. To remember the dismembered is therefore to resist the transformation of a people into anonymous remains. The political activism called for by *ashlaa'* is an activism of naming, witnessing, archiving, mourning, and reconstructing: it defends the right of the dead to be identified, the right of the living to remember, and the right of a people to remain legible against the colonial attempt to erase both name and memory. Such activism does not treat the fragment as a passive remainder of violence, but as a demand for public recognition, legal accountability, archival preservation, and collective reconstruction.

Biography

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Notes

1. “[In] addition to roadblocks and the 700 kilometer-long fence/wall, which Israel is still extending in and around the West Bank, mostly within the OPT, isolating Palestinian communities inside ‘military zones,’ Palestinians in these zones must obtain multiple special permits any time they enter or leave their homes or land” (Amnesty International 2023, 6).

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