

**Recontextualizing Refugee Narratives:
A Necropolitical Study of Abawi's A Land of
Permanent Goodbyes**

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Abstract:

This research examines the intersection of the refugee crisis and necropolitics as portrayed in Abawi's *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*, which recounts the devastating experiences of Syrian refugees escaping from the geopolitics of war through the lens of Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics. It analyzes the ways sovereign powers are in charge of life and death through the mechanisms of warfare enforcement, exclusion of marginalized people, securitized border policies and the international indifference towards the sufferings of displaced migrants. The study delves into the qualitative approach by exploring how Abawi's depiction of displacement and resilience resonates with Mbembe's conception of 'politics of death', where characters are subjected to 'bare life', a state of survival that is governed by peripheral forces that dictate who will live and who will die. Additionally, it questions the moral repercussions of such power regulations for international migration policies that are often ignored due to extremely politicized media stream. Such kind of practices by the media perpetuates the status of necropolitics where refugees are overlooked as threats rather than as individuals worthy of empathy and protection. Thus, the study accentuates the significance of recontextualizing the refugee narratives as an intricate geopolitical matter that surpasses humanitarian concerns by urging a nuanced reflection of the ethical responsibilities of the global powers amidst adversity of displacement.

Keywords: *Displacement, Necropolitics, Refugee Crisis, Syrian Civil War, Humanitarian Crisis*

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Introduction

The global refugee crises have been one of the gravest politically stimulating dilemmas of the 21st century with millions of forced displacements from warfare, turbulence, and uncertainty. However, their representation is not static but rather persistently twisted by global power structures, media narratives, and political discourses. Instead of portraying them as the victims who are in need of empathy, their narratives are recontextualized by the media as a threat to security, financial burdens, and often subjected as political apparatus in geopolitical conflicts. Abawi's (2018) *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* serves a resistance against these forged narratives by postulating the very idea that refugee experiences are not the consequences of mere humanitarian crisis, but an outcome of necropolitical factors that decide who is permitted to live and who is cast off to die. Mbembe's conception of necropolitics is significant to study the selected text regarding the contemporary dynamics of political turmoil, power, and violence in Syria. It's more than a decade that the Civil War has devastated the Syrians' economical and political state. The drastic mobilization and sectarian Inter-Arab conflicts have devastated Syria. As far as back in 2011, the passive uprisings opposition to the regime was whirled into a massacre that dismantled state's peace into pieces. An iron fist response of Assad regime's, catalyzed the external forces and intense the deterioration of the sectarian conflict in Syria. It stirred the casualty of countless Syrians and conversely, some of them were exiled as forced migrants. Consequently, an ample range of external forces are affecting Syria and intensifying the sectarian war in the region by "devolving it into a primal, Darwinian battle for survival (Jasser, 2014, p. 64).

Refugee narratives bring light to the fact that is otherwise not perceptible to mainstream media or consciously kept invisible. They are frequently portrayed in undignified, sadistic, and deplorable living circumstances. As Gallien theorizes the notion that refugee term evolves through history by privileging the political positions and ideological concerns over financial and ecological ones. This surveillance marks it as an approach of "resistance and resilience against the perpetuation of colonial control, predation, and destruction, in "postcolonial" times" (Gallien, 2018, p. 723). Additionally, these narratives are not confined to dejection that only dwells on the ethical double standards of the West rather its temporality extends beyond history of the trauma or sufferings. Sassen (2014) highlights this bleak reality that mirrors the necropolitical circumstances where contemporary global economic forces have rendered the migrants to a state where human existence's value is

condensed to its most indispensable rights and dignity, by further leading them to a truth where people are enforced into a perpetual condition of survival without any sort of identity. As she posits that "borders are no longer just territorial; they are now an economic and political tool to exclude, manage, and limit the lives of those deemed unnecessary for the global economy" (Sassen, 2014, p. 143).

This dynamic is further explored by Arendt (1958) in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where she articulates that statelessness embodies the ultimate rejection of political existence and the separation of individuals from any kind of lawful political acknowledgements. For Arendt, having the rights is essential for political existence as devoid of defense in a nation-state; turn out to be utterly vulnerable for people to the whim of arbitrary power. Consequently, stateless people exclude from the political community and deprived of their capability to act within the confines of society and law ultimately leads them to death. This segregation is not merely dispossession of citizenship but a severe form of social and political abandonment in which people not only lose their identity in the world but their ability to participate in politics in a meaningful way as well (Arendt, 1958).

In the same vein, Fanon's (1961) standpoint positioned as the foundational notion of necropolitics, where the oppressor encounters both physical extermination and existential form of death. As he opines that "the violence of colonization is such that it robs the native of his identity and renders him, in a sense, dead before he dies" (Fanon, 1961, p. 45). Foucault's (1991) concept of biopower and the sovereign permit to persecute delineates the way modern states govern and likewise Agamben (1998) hinges on the idea that the sovereign sphere has the right to kill beyond celebrating a sacrifice and without committing homicide and his statement is significant in comprehending the role and concept of sovereignty in the context of refugee crisis. Drawing on Agamben's conception of sovereignty, Mbembe (2003) introduces 'necropolitics' to name the absolute power state to highlight the exercise of sovereignty and the power to dictate the lives of individuals.

In the face of dehumanizing global refugee crisis, fiction becomes a dominant medium to investigate the nuanced dimensions of exile, war, and suffering. Echoing this sentiment, Katouh (2022) traces the Syrian War crises through the leading character Salama, a first year pharmacy student who is enforced to turn out to be a war doctor because of the accumulation migration of the medical professionals. She takes the danger by putting her life at risk while going to the hospital because of the mass shootings, attacks and bombings by the Syrian government forces. As she grapples this state as "You think you

have a choice? There is no way out. The war decides who lives, who dies, and who is forced to keep living with the ghosts”. (Katouh, 2022, p. 85). It reveals that necropolitics put forth ahead of the physical brutality to psychological war. As showcase this picture where power decides who may live and who die “You see the military beating people up in the streets, dragging them away and murdering them, this is where hope dies” (Katouh, 2022, p. 116).

Theoretical Framework

Mbembe (2003) in *Necropolitics* interrogates the ways state exertion its power not merely through biopolitics, but through the regulation of death as well. He challenges the traditional understanding of governess and sovereignty by postulating the very idea that modern states do not only endorse the mechanism of life such as healthcare, wellbeing and education for its civilians but also enforces death. This coercion of death includes militarized violence and segregation policies that render the vulnerable human beings, such as refugees exposed to brutality. Mbembe states that the sovereignty is the “ultimate expression to a large degree in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 11). In this contemporary milieu, politics is imagined as kind of war and where sovereignty has the right to kill, likewise war is used as a means of attaining the authority or as an approach of exerting the right to execute. He points out that power is always exercised and “to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power” ((Mbembe, 2003, p. 12). To add to it, he theorizes Foucault’s concept of biopower and infers that it is the domain of life whose power has been seized.

Power is frequently generalized to fictionalize the concept of enemy. In necropolitical world, Mbembe believes that the word ‘other’ is regarded as a threat to life in colonial governance. And same is the case with refugees around the globe, as they are considered as a threat to the state. Refugee camps are the perfect instance of necropolitical world where inhumane circumstances prevail and the state sees displacement and imprisonment as the best solution for unwanted population. He holds the view that through Nazi’s extermination of Jews, we can witness how necropower operates by using the power to homicide. Moreover, various methods of killing have been introduced to get rid of the Jews and other communists that were a threat to Nazi. This demonstrates the notion that necropolitics is “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 27). Death is used as a political tool to assert dominance. Necropolitics is a kind of colonial governance where

race is subjected with certain conditions of life by conferring their status of living as dead and the conditions that are indecent and sanctioned for the exclusion of political ends. In addition, Mbembe also highlights the execution of violence against vulnerable people by noting that history is replete with such incidents of execution where merely to entertain the audience the sufferings of the convict is prolonged as a form of play. The basic purpose of this punishment by the state is to arouse the fear among people for the state and showcase its power.

This perspective puts forth the idea that the colony manifests racial hierarchy and superiority and demonstrates the way, the race has been “an ever present shadow in Western political thought and practice”, particularly when it comes to imagining the “inhumanity of, or rule over, foreign peoples” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 17). Moreover, he addresses the history by recalling the subject of slavery. He views that necropolitics is the substitute of slavery as life of slaves bears notable resemblance to the plight of targeted people in necropolitical world. Therefore, a slave’s life is marked with triple loss, which indicated the loss of home, life and political status. This persecution and exploitation of vulnerable population is intensified by the power imbalance between the necropolitical sovereign and targeted population. Mbembe notices that Palestine is one of the most accomplished forms of the subjugation of target population at the hands of necropolitical colonizers. Palestinians’ lack of access to resources intensifies their exploitation at the hands of Israeli settlers who engage in the necropolitical practices of declaring death for natives. Moreover, natives’ right to live is violated by restricting their movement across the city spaces. As a result, Israeli settlers are able to manipulate the Palestinian landscape to their own advantage. Consequently, Palestinian population is deprived of both i.e., the territory as well as the access to resources. Using the paradigm of Palestinian occupation, Mbembe explores the concept of “infrastructural warfare” ((Mbembe, 2003, p. 29). This form of warfare refers to the acts of sabotage carried out by genocidal powers that seek to damage the resources owned by the target population. This includes dismantling of electronic gadgets, buildings, forests, water containers etc. The intention behind these actions is to force natives to accept their defeat and surrender to the sovereignty of the necropower. Cumulatively, it can be observed that necropolitical sovereigns seek to subject target population to a life of ‘humiliation’, ‘interrogations’, ‘beatings’, and ‘curfews’. Everyday life in a subjugated town offers glimpses of “children blinded”, “parents shamed” and “soldiers patrolling”. These conditions of living assign living subjects the status of “living dead” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 40). Even if the sovereign powers allow

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target population to continue to live a ‘bare life’, that life is worse than the death. They always find themselves on the verge of life and death. Therefore, it can be argued that necropolitical subjects are either killed at once or put to slow death.

In the context of refugees, necropolitics manifests in various ways including the global inequalities that intensify the refugee crises. Although Western countries have more resources and political influence but they frequently prioritize their economic interests over defense of refugee rights. Such kind of practice perpetuates the state of necropolitics where refugees are overlooked as threats rather than as individuals worthy of empathy and protection. Furthermore, the junction of necropolitics and refugees draw attention to the political and ethical standoff by surrounding the humanitarian intrusion and accountability. Mbembe questions the power that decides whether individual’s lives are worth defending and whose deaths are inevitable. His statement is predominantly poignant in view of global responses to refugee crises, where sovereignty and citizenship debates over borders frequently overshadow the essential human rights and self-esteem of displaced populations.

Analysis

Millions of Syrians’ lives are reshaped in the blink of an eye due to the brutality and devastation of civil war. Abawi has poured light on the grave reality of the geopolitical turmoil of the warfare through the character of Tareq. It was the beginning of Tareq’s miseries when his family is viciously killed in a blast explosion. Abawi hinges on the idea that war is a daily trauma for Syrians and it was the choice “made by those in their country and outside Syria that brought them to this night (Abawi, 2018, p. 4). It is no more an internal conflict but a war among superpowers. Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics decisively examines the strategic violence and sovereign powers that decide the worth of their lives that migrants have to endure as portrayed by Abawi in *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*. It is a poignant analysis of the migrants by illustrating the atrocious realities of displacement, survival and loss. Abawi chalks out this fragility by stating that Syria is taken by the world and nothing is left for its people. Musa adds that homes are abandoned; the areas that still have a few people are besieged to survive. Above all “you have got Russia, Assad, and even America in the air, and Daesh the free Syrian Army and militias on the ground”(Abawi, 2018, p. 35).

The omnipresence of war and indiscriminate airstrikes demonstrate the necropolitical powers as the Syrian regime and its cronies take the decision of the lives of civilians by targeting them as a way of suppressing dispute. They

are not permissible to have a word against the regime. For speaking against the caliphate, Daesh beheaded the young boy in front of his parents. Brutality does not end here; they dragged his lifeless head by “lifting it from the puddle of blood it had rested in, and ran a sharp blade back and forth across the neck, slashing the flesh” (Abawi, 2018, p. 40). What Mbembe notes is that the execution of violence against vulnerable people is replete in history where such incidents of execution were merely to entertain the audience and the sufferings of the convict is prolonged as a form of play. The basic purpose of this punishment by the state is to arouse the fear among people for the state and showcase its power.

Hosseini (2018) also categorically illustrates this state of the dispelled migrants that are restrained in the inhuman cycle of constant search for home while sitting on a cold night and moonlit beach with dead babies. He also sheds light on the refugee crises that are often unnoticed due to exceedingly politicized media coverage by employing the canvas of the novel. The universality of the “unwelcome” refugees alleviate its dehumanizing effects as he encompasses other nationals collectively including Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis, and Somalis as well who are likewise cynical out of terror and trauma to comprehend the rejection at the borders. He underlines this situation as they have no choice but to “take misfortune elsewhere” (Hosseini, 2018, p. 30).

Abawi assess critically this systematic marginalization of refugees by divulging how media narratives, refugee camps, and borders work as mechanism to control preferably over protection and this neglect renders the refugees as vulnerable populations. Tareq has encountered such sort of absconding when enforced to escape from Syria, only to stumble on the fact that survival is still indecisive even afar from its borders. As he recounts “they were met at every border by military and police, some beating them, others yelling as if they were stray dogs” (Abawi, 2018, p. 168). This resonates with Mbembe’s idea shed light on the fact that borders function as regions of necropolitical power, where Sovereign powers make decisions about who can be allowed to pass and who is predestined to breathe his last. Abawi vividly unearths that media narratives support with the state welfare by sustaining exclusionary policies that substantiate militarization and refugee suppression. The media often exhibits that Turkey is incredibly kind towards migrants but contrary to this, coast guards keep piercing the water boats with intentions of drowning them at Turkish border. All they want is to provide evidence to the Europeans that they are trying their best to deter the displaced people away from entering into Europe. Jamila's articulates this state as “they are trying to kill us! Why does everyone want to kill us?” (Abawi, 2018, p. 109). Moreover, Musa and <https://journalsriuf.com/index.php/IJLL/index>

Tareq have not only witnessed the hunger crisis but they are treated worse than dogs in Turkey. An old Syrian woman was pleading for food in street and no one was showing any compassion. Instead of pitying the Syrian woman who was pleading for food, people are more concerned about the dog resting beside her and “the two strangers brought the dog a bowl of water and food” (Abawi, 2018, p. 61). As Mbembe delineates this mechanisms by asserting that states and other powers control life through the supremacy to dictate who will live and who will die while renders the individuals to a condition of ‘bare life’ where their survival is fragile and reliant on indifferent forces

By changing the spotlight from humanitarian assist to national safety measures, the media substantiates the strategic othering of displaced people, additionally, institutionalizing their identity as stateless and marginalized. Identity crisis within necropolitics puts forwards the argument that refugees have to undergo identity fragmentation when their existence is mere reduced to bodies of vulnerability and endurance. This loss becomes a sort of exclusionary control, where they are regarded as marginalized nameless masses that are dehumanized and anonymized. Abawi echoes this objectification through Tareq’s sufferings with his transitioning identity after displacement. He often perceives the credence of this horrendous transformation from being a Syrian national to unmoored subject of displacement. Tareq’s this state is disclosed within an extensive geopolitical milieu. Identity defines a person and humans have split identities by diverging themselves into multiplicity of cultures, families and nations but in refugee cases, they have no identity other than refugee. Their future generations will not be able to be acquainted with their roots. Destiny, the narrator claims that “what you hold so sacred can be forgotten by generations, and it can possible that your grandchildren may hate something you held precious” (Abawi, 2018, p. 71). This shift is a premeditated process that strengthens necropolitical strategies of segregation. The depiction of the pain and sufferings of the grieving families who have lost their loved ones as a result of forced displacements by the government itself is portrayed by Yazbek as well. She narrates the callous and inhuman tactics of the regime to convert the country into war. As she argues that “The brutality of the regime knows no bounds” (Yazbek, 2015, p. 6).

For Abawi, borders are not merely substantial barriers but systematic segregation and death. It is depicted as militarized forces where migrants are subjected as security threats, and their basics rights are often denied. There are some hunters who always take financial advantage from refugees’ miseries. Annis's character mirrors the intersection of refugees’ subjugation under the guise of aid. She exposes the Humanitarian organizations that collect millions

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in the name of donations for displaced people but do nothing for them. Their next stride out is that they bring kids who too busy “taking selfies with refugees behind them than to help them (Abawi, 2018, p. 73). Abawi hinges on the very idea that these predicaments are not restrained to Syrians only but there are millions of people from war torn countries that are besieged to make their way to Europe and even many have lost their lives. War has shattered their dreams and isolated them from their dear ones and the second they cross the borders for survival their status is shifted from legal to illegal. This testimonial corresponds to Mbembe’s idea of slow death function as mechanism of contemporary necropolitics where defenseless people are not inevitably put to death but are exposed to deteriorate situations. Abawi also foregrounds that psychological facet of slow death where trauma of despair haunts the refugees even after escaping from war zones. For Tareq, the relentless dread, systemic rejection, and loss of identity by host nations renders his survival fragile by underpinning the silencing of refugee voices globally. Abawi pours light on the destiny of the Syrians and presumes that they are born to die. This anxiety or mercilessness can be surmised as Tareq states “they all want us dead. Even if the war is won by someone, they all have blood on their hands” (Abawi, 2018, p. 36).

Abawi unveils the plight of refugees in an unimaginable chain of trauma where women have to endure a double-edged sword of insecurity and even some are constrained into prostitution and others taken up as slaves. Just as incarcerated individuals, they are enforced to work underneath dehumanizing circumstances, and they are strained to subsist within the scaffold of enslavement and neglect where they are dealt as bare human life, trapped flanked by survival and death. Among other refugees, Kamal chalks out the stark reality of Smugglers who add fuel to the refugee crisis. He adds that “this is human trafficking, but it is so easy for them” (Abawi, 2018, p. 146). Muzhgan, one of the Afghan girl was the victim of this barbarity as she persistently assaulted by her smuggler. She has no family and not a single soul is ready to assist her. Even after migrating to Europe, this humiliation will never let her to cope up with these appalling trauma memories of rape. So, necropolitics is the substitute of slavery as their life of slaves bears notable resemblance to the plight of targeted people in necropolitical world. Therefore, a slave’s life is marked with triple loss, which indicated the loss of home, life and political status. The vicious act of boarding the passengers displays that how hardheartedly refugees are treated. Tareq bears the witness of an old lady with a white scarf “being pushed into the boat, clearly in tears...her walking stick threw it toward the boat (Abawi, 2018, p. 100). This persecution and exploitation of vulnerable population is intensified by the power imbalance

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between the necropolitical sovereign and targeted population.

Conclusion

By recontextualizing refugee narratives through the lens of Mbembe's necropolitics, this paper has examined the ways Abawi's *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* exposes the entrapped violence and politically sanctioned exclusion of refugees that delineate the contemporary displacements crisis. The study has functioned both as critique and narrative by destabilizing the humanitarian discourses and reframes the refugee tribulations by divulging the necropolitical reality governing on the rule of who is permitted to suffer, who ought to live, and who is abandoned to die. Through Abawi's narrative, the devastating effects of displacement, erosion of identity, and systemic violence, within the broader global standpoint of state power and sovereignty are confronted. The portrayal of Tareq and his family's sufferings vividly foregrounds how refugees are trapped within the necropolitical apparatus, where survival possibility is by chance, that too is dictated by the institutionalized overlook of political economy of borders and sovereign states. By pointing up how media narratives, state policies, and border militarization add fuel to the dehumanization and exclusion of displaced refugees. It unveils that refugees are not just war victims, but subjects to a broader global system that dictates their disposability. Thus, Abawi's *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* serves as a poignant narrative that stipulates a reevaluation of policies regarding global refugee crisis and their right to live with dignity amidst necropolitical exclusion.

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