

A Necropolitical Analysis of Hanif's *Red Birds* and *Our Lady* of Alice Bhatti

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Received: 12-06-2025

Revised: 17-07-2025

Accepted: 01-08-2025

Published: 14-08-2025

ABSTRACT

Necropolitics is the study of controlling the lives of individuals in a way that pushes them towards death. This study examines two novels by Muhammad Hanif: Our Lady of Alice Bhatti (2011) and Red Birds (2018). The research explores the ways in which war, gender, and religious oppression reduce marginalized characters to disposable lives. It also aims to analyze how necropolitics influences the lived experiences of vulnerable individuals in selected novels. Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics (2003) serves as the theoretical framework for analysis. This research shows how highest authorities oversee and manage the zones of death and existence for individuals. The places mentioned in the novel like refugee camp, hospital, and the zone of death and living death, represent those places where people lose their rights and dignity, and gradually their desire to live as well. The findings of the study show that both novels address global issues like state of violence, war, gender-based oppression, and treatment of minorities, and thus, play a pivotal role in necropolitical system. In other words, death and suffering are common in both novels.

Keywords: *necropolitics, refugee camp, state-violence, vulnerable individuals, disposable lives, zones of death.*

INTRODUCTION

Within the field of postcolonial literature, authors use fiction to critique systematic brutality, politics and power. Muhammad Hanif, one of Pakistan's most contemporary novelists, use fiction as a vehicle to expose the inherent cruelty of institutions including the military, health care systems, and religiously divided societies. Both selected novels *Red Birds* (2018) and *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2011) describe the heartbreaking experiences of marginalized people- refugees, religious minorities, and women - whose lives are shaped by the continual threat of abandonment, isolation, and death.

Necropolitics, according to Mbembe (2003), examines the dynamics of power through the lens of death. This also explains how institutional and governmental entities abuse their power to cause death and suffering to particular people. Furthermore, the power structures determine who is a member of society and who is not. This means that power structures decide who lives and who dies in society. The state of exception, and marginalized groups that live under constant threat of violence and social death are the focus of necropolitics. Necropolitical practices include the treatment of refugees and war victims, in which the government or outside powers decide how to treat people, depriving them of their humanity and rights.

Muhammad Hanif is a postcolonial writer. The development of personal identity and expression in a society where marginalized communities face several challenges is largely dependent on their work. Hanif portrays injustice, suffering, and the rules of life and death in both novels. Consequently, the study focuses mostly on characters' suffering since it gives voice to those who lack it. This study advances our knowledge of the influence of necropolitics on Pakistani literature, particularly in Hanif's novels.

Statement of the Problem

This study looks at the idea of necropolitics in Hanif's writings. Several studies on the topic of necropolitics in Pakistani literature have been conducted; nevertheless, Muhammad Hanif's works have not yet been subjected to this viewpoint. The purpose of necropolitics in Hanif's novels is to reflect marginalized individuals or society. The suffering and political implications of life and death are highlighted in both selected novels. Therefore, it is essential to study the characters' suffering since it gives voice to voiceless individuals. This makes it easier to comprehend how necropolitical environment affects Pakistani literature, particularly Hanif's novels.

Research Questions

The following questions have been designed to achieve the objectives of this research:

1. How the impact of war, religious and gender based oppression is presented in Muhammad Hanif's novels *Red Birds* and *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*?
2. How necropolitics create the zones of death and living death in both novels?

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is three-fold. First and foremost, this will help to raise the voice of voiceless individuals. This study focuses on marginalized groups, including women and religious minorities as shown in Hanif's novel. Both novels highlight the violence and suffering endured by marginalized groups. Furthermore, it also addresses global issues like international violence, war and minority treatment. Additionally, this study is important because it highlights how literature reflects and critiques the injustices faced by marginalized communities. Thus, Hanif's novels provide a thorough analysis of the social structures that govern life and death. This study helps us understand the various ways that social exclusion manifests itself, including discrimination based on gender.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Necropolitics focuses on the management of death. Despite much research on Hanif's social criticism, the aim of necropolitics is the management of life and death by sovereign powers, remains mostly unexplored. Yaqin (2021) conducted a critical analysis of Kamila Shamsie's works, including *Verses Broken*, *Burnt Shadows*, and *Home Fire*, based on the ideas of necropolitics, necropolitical power, and traumatization, as influenced by Achille Mbembe's works on the subject. She argued that Shamsie's novels provide a deep analysis of democratic principles like rights, citizenship, and sovereignty. Her character offers readers emotional journeys, boundaries, and a structured military universe to show them the connection between stress and power. It prompts the reader to consider necropolitics from the perspective of socially marginalized groups. She concluded that through her portrayals of Pakistan and Great Britain, Kamila Shamsie draws more attention to the issue of social justice. According to Kakar et al. (2021) fiction helps to highlight the global power struggles of the United States, particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan. This study looks at how America has evolved into a decision-making power

that affects peoples' lives, mostly in emerging South Asian nation. Based on the four fundamental principles of necropolitics, power, war, politics, and death, this study focuses on two novels to support the idea that necropolitics was the true power of national governance. The study looked at the texts of Khalid Hosseini's and Nadeem Aslam Khan. The deep analysis of these works has made it easier to comprehend Mbembe's theory of necropolitics taking into consideration the Afghan war. Roche (2002) investigated how linguistic oppression contributes to cultural and physical death. It also refers to the idea of necropolitics and affirms that linguistic oppression is a type of physical violence and social death, imposed by colonial and modern state regimes. The study demonstrates the connection between language loss and health decline, emotional stress and social disintegration, particularly in marginalized areas. In other words, it offers a theoretical framework for comprehending language as a tool of governmental control. The study has shown the clear connection between language and death.

Altaf and Shahzad (2021) examined *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* from a grammatical viewpoint, emphasizing subalternity and resistance to patriarchal and capitalist systems. As subaltern, they supported Alice's fight against poverty, patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, and systematic oppression. The study focuses on identity building by highlighting the difficulties Alice faces, due to prejudice based on her gender, religion, and social status. Furthermore, Ahmad (2019) studied the socioeconomic struggles of marginalized classes in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* using Marxist theory. The study classified how hegemonic pressures and class structures affected Alice, a chaste and marginalized nurse, who faced discrimination, harassment and professional marginalization. Despite these challenges, she fights for equality and provides for her family, embodying Marx's criticism of exploitation based on social classes. According to Ahmed and Nasir (2022), Alice Bhatti, a woman from Pakistan's Christian minority, is perceived as being both colonized and fighting for independence in a patriarchal and marginalizing society. She is powerless due to societal oppression, despite her intelligence, education, and determination. The study found that in Pakistan's postcolonial societies, women who belong to minority groups frequently experience social isolation and discrimination.

The way that Hanif's novel challenged western neo-imperialism is examined by Tilwani and Hassan (2023). drawing inspiration from Edward Said's theory of Orientalism and Gramsci's theory of hegemony, this study examined how *Red Birds* depicts resistance to historical narratives while highlighting the marginalization of members of a Muslim community devastated by war. This analysis is helpful for studies on necropolitics because it offers a framework for examining how power, life, and death are managed in neo-imperial contexts. Another study looked at the relationship between language, ideology, religion, and power, focusing on how language shapes social structures and reflects power dynamics. Based on Foucault's theory, it emphasizes how discourse is socially constructed and plays a significant role in establishing cultural norms and behaviors. This method is consistent with social construction, which holds that language is a force that shapes society. Discourse is used in *Red Birds* to stimulate the realities of the characters in a war-torn nation (Abbas et al. 2023). To investigate how knowledge impact force relations, particularly in conflict areas like the Middle East, the researchers have employed the analysis of (FDA) Foucauldian Theory of Discourse Analysis. They have examined the ways in which organizations use discourse to exert control, exposing the ridiculous use of power. Thus, Hanif's work reveals how language shapes life and death under neo-imperialist powers. To investigate the psychological effects of war, Saadia (2023) examined *Red Birds* through the lens of psychoanalysis and trauma theory. Research has shown that war causes long lasting trauma, especially in children like Momo and Bro Ali, which leads to mental health issues and identity conflicts. Due to the destruction of their homes, the lack of necessities, and the exploitation by relief organizations, the refugees in the camp suffer from severe psychological distress. This study makes clear the profound effects of war on the lives and minds of conflict victims.

Previous studies have focused on gender related violence, postcolonial perspective, psychological impact and feminist identities, but they have not examined these selected novels from the perspective of necropolitics, which shows how power structures or the ruling class manages life and death. This study fills this gap by examining both novels from the lens of necropolitics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of necropolitics serves as the foundation for this study. Achille Mbembe in his 2003 essay “Necropolitics” addresses the political community management and situations where life is neglected. According to this theory, Mbembe (2003) explains that in modern world, sovereignty is not limited to the creation or enforcement of laws but rather refers to the authority that decides who is allowed to live in society and who must suffer, it might be said that necropolitics clarifies how death is managed in addition to explaining how life is controlled. It concerns how governments, especially those in charge of marginalized communities, use their authority to determine who has the right to life and who does not.

It is said that the next step after biopolitics is necropolitics. The ideas of biopolitics and biopower form the basis of Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics. The notions of biopolitics and biopower were first introduced by Michel Foucault in his writings. Traditional political theories, such as Foucault’s biopolitics, focus on how governments manage and control life, for instance, through population control, health care, and education. In other words, necropolitics is the continuation of biopolitics, because it provides a platform for the reflection and analysis of some situations that biopower ignores. Mbembe’s (2003) notion of necropolitics is about studying power through the lens of violence and death. Mbembe (2003) in his essay said that: “The ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who can live and who must die”. This shows the relationship between power and death.

The key idea of this theory is “death world”. According to Mbembe (2003), death world is a place where individuals either live in challenging conditions or are unable to maintain this repressive system. At these places, people live in constant fear of dying. Despite their physical existence, they are dead on an emotional and social level. Furthermore, Mbembe mentions how modern cultures create “death worlds” such as refugee camps, conflict zones, or even areas governed by repressive regimes, where entire populations are prevented from living in constant fear of suffering. Additionally, he classified that those who live in death world are subjected to brutality and violence. These individuals are thought to have lost their moral principles.

NECROPOLITICAL ANALYSIS OF *RED BIRDS*

The writer begins this work by discussing the absurdity of human nature in relation to tasks that both embody order and chaos in this world. There are three parts of the novel. The first section, “In the Desert”, introduces the reader to all the narrators. It starts with a pilot who, lost in the desert, tries to find his crashed plane (Durrani, 2019). The author uses his narrative to introduce the reader to American foreign policy and military engagements in several conflicts. A typical family and its personal journeys in a post-conflict setting is the focus of second section, “In the Camp”. The chapter focuses on issues pertaining to internally displaced people, refugees and others who have experienced displacement. The goal of final section is to quickly reveal successes that are presented in almost unbelievable and inventive way. The author uses attacks of American soldiers as an example of how residents of areas where there is armed conflict often react to such circumstances.

In the novel, war serves as necropolitical tool. The theme of war takes center stage in the novel, emphasizing how it has a profound effect on both the outside world and those directly involved in it, such as military and the civilian population. Hanif depicts how the characters' lives are impacted by violence, loss, and instability brought on by the war. Furthermore, Hanif presents trauma and a sense of hopelessness that the war leaves behind. However, Hanif does not stop at describing the immediate destruction caused by war; rather, he also emphasizes its long-term effects. War has been condensed to carpet-bombing followed by dry rations and craft classes for the refugees, women who had never walked beyond the village well, now they could all go and live in UN tents, eat exotic food donated by USAID and burp after drinking fizzy drinks (Hanif, 2018, p.32-33). This example raises the question of the necropolitical mechanism since, according to the above mentioned line, it is clear that the state exercises power through both humanitarian assistance and violent actions like carpet bombing. This humanitarian aid is giving people food that has been prepared with the intention of giving them a place to live (for example, UN tents or refugee camps). In this way, this humanitarian aid becomes a tool for managing and stabilizing displaced populations. In other words, Hanif illustrates in his speech how war weakens communities' ability to survive on their own. It is clear from this example that war not only kills people with bombs but also gives rise to these new forms of dependency and subjugation. This aligns with the idea of necropolitics, which shows how contemporary nations exercise their power to normalize the lives and deaths of marginalized communities. These contemporary states govern life and death through the regulation of survival rather than through cruel acts. Thus, the refugee camps function as "death-worlds" where it is difficult to distinguish between life and death. In other words, people in death-worlds are neither fully alive, nor fully dead. They live their lives according to sovereign powers.

Women who had never walked beyond the village well, now they could all go and live in UN tents, eat exotic food donated by USAID and burp after drinking fizzy drinks (Hanif, 2018, p.33). This line illustrates that the women who are once confined to live in the boundaries of village, are now forced to live in UN tents. In these UN tents (camps), refugees have no choice, but they have to rely on what they are given. Everything in these camps is provided by international agencies. This exerts control over refugees.

Another example from the text is:

‘May be you gave them the wrong target?’ Momo was angry at Bro Ali and was trying to squirm away from Mother Dear’s protective custody. He thought he could run to the house and undo the destruction. ‘I didn’t give them the target today. Bro Ali was angry at Momo.... Sometimes there are mistakes, said Father Dear. ‘Even the best of us can make mistakes’. ‘This is not a mistake’, Bro Ali snapped at him. They never get it wrong. I know. They have done it deliberately. ‘They have done it to show us that they can’. (Hanif, 2018, p.98)

This example shows the discussion between Momo, Bro Ali, and Father Dear after their house has been bombed. The writer of the novel through these lines shows the reality of individuals who are living under this necropolitical system. This necropolitical system said that death is not accidental, but it is deliberately done by power. These lines show the structure and high connectivity of power over life and death and thus came under the concept of necropolitics as given by Achille Mbembe. The lines mentioned above illustrate that individuals not just face destruction, but they are also targeted at intentionally. The line which Momo asks is: ‘Maybe you gave them the wrong target’. This shows the hope the destruction is the result of mistakes i.e, life and death are managed by sovereign power. Momo’s question shows the hope in justice.

Furthermore, the angry response of Bro Ali ended this hope. He says ‘They have done it deliberately. They have done it to show us that they can’. This line illustrates that in necropolitical zone, the destruction and violence is not incidental, rather it is based on purpose. The purpose behind this destruction is to show the control of power i.e, sovereign powers control and manage life and death in refugee camp (necropolitical zone). Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics is not just about providing justice to individuals rather it is about who holds that power, and who has the power to kill. So, in the mentioned example, bombing is not a strategic mistake, but it is display of absolute power. The purpose behind this absolute power is to create fear among populace. Thus, the bombing is done intentionally to remind the individuals that their lives are entirely based on external forces.

Father Dear’s statement, “Even the best of us can make mistakes’ illustrates that mistakes are done by humans and these mistakes are forgivable. But Bro Ali rejected this statement and said, “This is not a mistake’. This response of Bro Ali highlights more awareness about necropolitical zones. This means that violence is calculated and ordered, it is not chaotic. The families are victim of target, and the targets are not misfortune, they are targets of death. In this situation Bro Ali came to know that in necropolitical zones, there is no protection. There is supremacy that sovereign power shows on them, and there is no justification for this. So, the camp is a place of death where life is exposed to brutality. The individuals in the camp are seen as civilians, they are seen as vulnerable people. Individuals realize that they are not treated as fully humans by the power, and this fear of death and destruction is the main strategy of their control.

Under Mbembe’s necropolitics, refugee camp is like zone of death, as human lives are devalued here, refugees are caught between consumption and destruction. The paradoxical existence of life and death is shown in the example, as appetite and destruction coexist:

A man can have an appetite especially in the middle of a war.’ ‘But this place is not America. You can’t eat everything here,’ says Doctor. ‘The fugee food is poison. If it doesn’t kill you, it’ll make you impotent.’
(Hanif, 2018, p.125)

This reinforces the idea that war does not erase human instincts rather it exposes the cruelty and management of life and death under necropolitical rule. In short, these lines highlight the function of humanitarian aid, as it becomes a tool to control disposable populations. And this example shows that refugees in the novel not only face violence and displacement, but they are also experiencing forms of slow death.

In the novel, the cycle of war and aid is clearly mentioned. “If I didn’t bomb some place, how would she save that place? If I didn’t rain fire from skies, who would need her to douse that fire on the ground?” (Hanif, 2018, p.201). This example shows that Ellie admits those acts of destruction by creating the needs for humanitarian aid. This means that there is no bombing, then there would be no need for aid. Thus, this is connected to Mbembe’s necropolitics where the decision of who lives and who must die is in the hands of institutional powers. This decision of living and dying is not through direct violence but rather control on the conditions of existence is also necessary. In this example, war resulted in death and destruction, and after this destruction, there is a need of aid. Thus, this subsequent aid is a part of the same system. This shows that life-saving actions including food and aid are provided just after death and destruction. The sovereign powers first create zones of death (e.g. refugee camp), then expose their forces by providing them aid and showing their control to fix the war.

NECROPOLITICAL ANALYSIS OF *OUR LADY OF ALICE BHATTI*

This novel by Hanif explores power dynamics of life and death of his Christian protagonist, Alice Bhatti. It explores the themes of survival, identity, gender inequality and religious necropolitics. The life of the female protagonist is marked by hardships of survival as a minority facing double marginalization. But being a nurse, she saves the lives of people neglected by their relatives and killed by institutionalized violence. Like the violence and brutality of the police department, judiciary was also involved in the subjugation of weak communities. The punishment of Alice as a Christian girl highlights the exploitation of court system in the hands of powerful people, as Joseph Bhatti says, “the law is the eternal whore for those who can pay for its upkeep” (Hanif, 2011, p.48).

Joseph Bhatti as an inhabitant of French Colony and a part of “Chohra biradri” was subjugated as her daughter Alice was sentenced to eighteen months prison for “being a soldier of Jesus” (p.198) in her nursing college.

The experiences of Alice in the Borstal jail were another reflection of the horrible mental and physical torture in the hands of dominant people. As she often remembers, “there is nothing scarier than a sixteen-year-old girl in the Borstal who feels she has been discriminated against” (p.16). She was not only discriminated as a member of Christian community but also on the basis of her gender in the male dominated society due to her attractive physical features. The religious and gendered violence against her in the Borstal reflects institutionalized necropower by the state machinery. The Sacred Heart Hospital of all Ailments presents a horrible picture of life and living death. It highlights the institutional neglect, a kind of tool to exercise necropower. The experiences of Alice as a nurse brought her into direct contact with the bureaucratic machinery of the state through its policy of negligence and indifference. She witnesses the slow and painful deaths of patients in hospital due to the indifferent behavior of medical staff. It resembles with Mbembe’s (2003) notion that “necropolitics involves the use of social and bureaucratic means to enforce slow death” (p.40).

Teddy Butt was a symbol of death in the city as he was hired as a part time target killer by G squad to deal people who cannot be proved guilty in courts. As Hanif describes, “[he was] a companion to people who have been caught but not yet killed, a companion for the passengers on their last journey” (p.89). It reflects how state controls its citizens, particularly minorities by creating a sphere of death around them.

Furthermore, The Sacred Hospital was not only a space of death and living death for patients but also a sphere of political and religious turmoil. Hanif narrates the incident of Zainab’s death to highlight the gendered violence. He describes how Teddy Butt took the revenge of her wife’s lover Noor, not by killing him but by killing his mother as vulnerable victims of physical violence.

The novel is rich in the instances of stigmatization of Christians as “Choochas” who have the only duty as sweepers. Throughout her life, Alice considers herself alienated as, “Choochas are considered untouchable” (p.11) in Pakistan. She was aware of this social inequality from Borstal jail to general markets as:

She is aware of the fact that different rules apply outside French Colony; some people do not want to drink from the same glass that she has drunk from, others will not take banana from the same bunch that she has taken from (Hanif, 2011, p.87).

As Joseph Bhatti asserts, “These Muslas will make you clean their shit and then complain that you stink” (p. 77). It reflects the subjugation and dehumanization of religious minorities in the world around the French Colony. As the writer describes, “He had always maintained the swage of a Choohra, an untouchable with attitude” (p.48). He educated her daughter and asked her to live with her head upright. But when Alice was married to a Muslim, he advises her not to feel inferior to him. As he says, “Just because they became Muslas doesn’t mean that they are not better than us” (Hanif, 2011, p.109).

Mbembe (2003) introduced the concept of “death-worlds”, spaces where people face and fear death every moment and even their existence is a form of living death. He holds the view that such death zones are created by states and introduced to maintain necropower. The Sacred Heart Hospital is also a death world where poor patients, particularly women come to die due to unethical and indifferent attitude of medical staff. Once Alice protested the slow and continuous death of a female patient saying, “she’s dying, can’t you see?”, but she got the cold reply, “We all are” (Hanif, 2011, p.96). They all fear death all the time in this hospital which Noor states, “This place smells of death” (p.32). So, the examples from the whole novel show how necropolitics is embedded in everyday life.

CONCLUSION

This research analyzes Muhammad Hanif’s *Red Birds* and *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* through the framework of Necropolitics, as given by Achille Mbembe in 2003. The focus of this theory is on how institutional structures and international organizations determines life and death of marginalized individuals. This study highlights the role of necropolitical structures in zones of death and living death. The places mentioned in the novel are refugee camp, death-worlds, zone of death and living death are those places where rights and dignity of individuals are lost, death is normalized and hope for living is erased. The findings of the study show that religious and gender-based oppression play a pivotal role in necropolitical system. For instance, Alice Bhatti faces institutional and patriarchal violence just because of her Christian identity. Similarly, in *Red Birds* the failed humanitarian aid, and the continuous presence of war is revealed. In other words, death and suffering are common in both novels. Furthermore, this study allows future researchers to combine necropolitics with comparative and intersectional perspectives.

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