

Necro-politics: Representation of Socio-civil Death of Blind Zainab in A Case of Exploding Mangoes by Muhammad Hanif

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Abstract

The paper examines the role of necro-politics in shaping the socio-civil death of Zainab, a blind character in Muhammad Hanif's novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008). Drawing on Mbembe's notion of necro-politics (2003&2019) the study investigates that how sovereign entities like judicial systems, law enforcement agencies, in dictatorial regime reinforce systematic socio-civil death wherein she is denied legal recognition and reduced to a disposable subject. Zainab's blindness makes her vulnerable to both legal and social marginalization, ultimately leading to her socio-civil death, The study employs a Catherine Belsey's textual analysis method (2014) to discover that how the select text depicts and criticizes the state mechanism in maintaining necro-power, by highlighting the intersection of law and disability and institutionalized violence. The study demonstrates that sovereign institutions function not merely as enforcers of law but as arbiters of life and death. In sum, the paper contributes to the broader critique on how necro-politics is operated in Pakistan revealing the systematic mechanism through which some disposable bodies are rendered invisible.

Key Words: Social Death, Civil Death, Sovereignty, Disposable body, State of Exception, Slain Body and Bare Life.

Introduction/ Review of Knowledge Production On Necro-Politics and Socio-Civil Death

The juncture of necro-politics and socio-civil death in *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008) provides a substantial framework, to examine the sovereign's role in deciding the life/death of the character Blind Zainab. Mbembe's (2003) necro-politics illustrates the sovereign powers' ability to regulate the lives of the bodies and make the death for the depicted character like blind Zainab. Hanif in *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* represents the authoritarian regime of military dictator Zia-ul-Haq who exemplifies the higher mechanism of necro-power especially in its treatment of dissenters and disposability of certain bodies within the dictatorial era. The novel contains satirical narratives and discovers the political/civil violence present in the structures of government institutions, military agencies particularly violence committed upon the character blind Zainab,

which represents the deletion of her autonomy, identity, civil rights under necro-power. In sum, the study examines how sovereign power extends beyond biopolitics to dictate not just who must die, but also who is condemned to a state of living death politically, socially, and physically. In order to conduct the systematic study, the subsequent question and objective has been formulated. Research Question: How does the character (Zainab) suffer from necro-political socio-civil death echoed in *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*? Research Objective: To identify, and to examine the necro-political socio-civil death encountered by the character Zainab in *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. The intellectual scholarship on the notion of ‘civil death’ has been well defined and explained by the literati for instance Ross Lerner (2020) studies the Orlando Patterson’s concept of ‘social death’ by taking into account the study of Dayan [2011] where he well-thought-out ‘social death’ in connection with the slavery by emphasizing resemblance and differentiation between social death (which focuses on the condition of enslavement) and civil death (a condition of imprisonment). Where Lerner described Patterson’s ‘social death’ as a sociological abstraction, used to explain the characteristics of slavery such as powerlessness, generalized dishonour and natal alienation in different place and time. On contrary to it, civil death has been defined by Thomas Blount (1670) in a law dictionary as it is a particular kind of interdiction, a “legitimum exilium” or banishment for a crime that results in the civilly dead being banned from all houses and denied fire and water, (the two necessary elements of life)’. According to Lerner (2020) “civil death as a specific punishment meted out by the “civill Law”: the civilly dead — implicitly a prisoner or slave — loses his will (“is not animated, and acted by his owne will”) because he is ruled by another” (p.331) Dayan (2011) describes that civil death as a “ritual” that “came into prominence in the United States as slavery was abolished, and resurfaced as a literal and legal via negativa” meant to render the prisoner “outside the boundary of human empathy: no longer recognized as a social, political, or individual entity” (p. 55). By discussing ‘social death’ Card (2010) says “genocide is social death” (p. 237), Kralova (2015) has identified the main attributes in the definition of ‘social death’ like a ‘loss of social identity’, a loss of social connectedness, and a loss connected with disintegration of body. Norwood (2009) considers social death as series of losses such as loss of social relations, loss of ability to take part in daily activities, and a loss of identity of the body. These losses often give birth to dissociation from social life. Patterson (1982) states in connection with slaves’ study, “the dominant image of the slave was that of an insider who had fallen, one who ceased to belong and had been expelled from normal participation in the community because of a failure to meet certain minimal legal or socioeconomic norms of behavior.” (Patterson, 1982, p. 41)

Material and Methods

The current study is based upon qualitative mode of research by utilizing Belsey’s (2014) textual analysis method to examine the depiction of necro-politics resulting socio-civil death in the selected novel. Particularly, the study uses a critical modal of necro-politics of Mbembe (2003&2019) and Patterson’s (1982) ‘social death’ and Rose Lerner’s (2020) ‘civil death’ to elaborate the depiction of authoritarian governance and the status of disposability of the character Zainab under the dictatorship of Zia. Primary data involves collection of textual passages from the select novel, however the secondary data comprises of theoretical works, research articles and books. The current framework is specifically focused on the subsequent codes like, socio-civil death and status of body as ‘disposable’ which encounters Agamben’s (1998) ‘bare life’ and state of ‘exception’. The method involves in the study is thematic analysis, identifying chief instances of necropolitical control and enforced disappearances and eraser of the body within the narrative.

Discussion

Dark Humour as Tool of Revealing Politics of Death

Hanif has used satirical critique of biopolitical and necro-political authoritarian regime and its practices in *A Case of Exploding mangoes* (2008). By the use of ‘dark humour’, ‘irony’, ‘sarcasm’ and wit. He artistically exposed the brutalities and hypocrisies of dictator’s regime. By mocking military personals, and all those in power, he weakens the legality and oppressive necropolitical systems. Dark humour can be defined as “A form of humour that regards human sufferings absurd rather than pitiable, ironic and pointless rather than gentle but somehow comic” Andre Breton (2001) describes in his book *Anthology of black humour* that it is a process that allows one to brush reality aside when it gets too distressing. Hanif has used dark humour or black-comedy to reveal necro-political sufferings of the people during Zia’s regime. Hanif Satirizes religious hypocrisy, misuse of power, political corruption, and role of warlords in Afghanistan which lights up through satire and dark humour. General Zia’s imposition of his own version of Islamization becomes ironical and he is unable to fit his version on the state matters. He becomes a laughing stock when he presents himself the real soldier of Islam. As an historical fact, the case of mysterious death of General Zia could not be solved till day. Muhammad Hanif tries to solve the mystery of his death through fiction, he attempts to unveil it through dark humour. His observations and experiences as military personnel and journalist during his job gave him an extra edge about exposing the hypocrisy and dark practices within the military domain. He highlights the misuse of power, religious corruptions and deconstructs the holy image of generals through humour and satire. Hanif uses satire to expose Zia’s methodology of letting people live and make die. Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957) elaborates that the fundamental aim of satire is “breaking up the lumber of stereotypes, fossilized beliefs, superstitious terrors, crank theories, pedantic dogmatisms, oppressive fashions, and all other things that impede the free movement ... of society” (p.233). In the same context, the select text is quite appropriate to unmask the necro-politics of the authoritarian regime to pen point violence, and killings through satirical tool. Mbembe’s notion of necro-politics, Mitchell Foucault’s bio-politics and Agamben’s state-of-exception, and bare-life the current study provides a critical analysis and investigation of the characters, events, and narratives how power has been manipulated to produce lived-beings and dead-beings. Which ways, and under what circumstances the characters have been portrayed suffering from the dilemmas of exclusion or death, whether it be of any kind, social or civil, or civic. In order to carry out the examination of the novel it’s essential to deeply look into the context presented by the author. To probe into how the selected text addresses the necro-political, social and civil notions of death and its existence, its substantial to plunge into Hanif’s narrative’s techniques, thematic context, socio-political background, and thematic examination. As it is obvious that the novel is set against the totalitarian regime and political turmoil of Pakistan. Therefore, it offers to examine the characters’ freedom, existence, state of living and death(s), and throwing them into the state of disposability in the authoritarian regime. Satire also reveals the individuals’ suffering in the form of death in life, social, civil, biological deaths such as in case of the reflected character Blind Zainab, analysed in the forthcoming section:

Blind Zainab as Socio-civil Dead

“What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?” (Mbembe.2003, p.12) Mbembe’s quote compels us to reflect about the connection of death with life, and the value of human body while being existing in the framework of politics and power within the state of Pakistan. How portrayed Zia’s regime valued the life of depicted blind Zainab, and in what way her body has been positioned and

deemed. Whether, she was given value of being human or not, or degraded from the status of being human. Is she worthy of protection or not? It's essential to understand that how power operated in novel's context to declare her disposable subject of socio-civil dead, and what positions such bodies have been kept in order of power is chief concern of the section. In order of necro-power in the select novel, some of the lives such as Zainab's, considered nothing more than a trash to be disposed of in the bin and her wounded life presents broader power dynamics of the time and institutional practices, laws and policies rested in one hand of dictator Zia had all the power to decide on the body of Zainab without caring about the ordinary humans. Hanif satirizes Zia's Islamization policy and its consequences on the individual. On his command, he altered the legal structure all at once, and moulded it to so-called Islamized legal construction of the country without considering its pros and cons. He implemented Hadood Ordinances in 1979 which were based upon drawing elements of Islamic Sharia law into the legal justice system of Pakistan. The Hadood Ordinances were borrowed to deal with the succeeding issues, such as the adultery, severe punishments like lashes, or stoning to death, those people who will be proved guilty of fornication or adultery. In case of false accusation of illicit sexual act, the accuser will be punished in case he or she could not bring evidences as per the description of Islamic Sharia law. Similarly, in case of theft, the criminal will have to suffer from amputation of hands as punishment. This legislation led the blinds to the vulnerable state. The novel represents the parody and misuse of Islamic Sharia Law used by Zia in his necropolitical regime. Zainab, an ordinary blind woman has been depicted as an innocent and kind, who becomes victim of physical and psychological brute, some unknown individuals committed a heinous act, and exploited her blindness, looted her of chastity and bodily autonomy.

She describes:

“It was dark but they had torches. They were three of them. There might have been another one outside the door. They smelled of car petrol, their hands were soft so they were not peasants. They tied my hands, they hit me when I asked them to let me go in their mothers', sisters' names. They were animals.” (p.213)

It could be argued that slain body or injured body, in necro-political regimes has all the potential to become a space where necro-power is visibly inscribed, resulting into creation of disposables. Zainab's inability to see, has been considered as her weakest point where she could easily be exploited as she could not recognize the rapists, neither she could bring witnesses to prove her rape. As the Zina law does not differentiate between those, blinds or disabled and who can see (able-bodied). As per the Islamic Law, four male Muslim adults are desirable as witness to testify to the real act of penetration for the accusation. In case, the victim woman is married, her husband will tell the court that she is having good character in that case, four men required as witnesses who have witnessed the same visuals of rape with same illustration of the event and if a victim woman is not married then she will have to prove her virginity before the occurrence of rape. She is supposed to prove that she has never done sexual act before the rape. This seems very absurd in case of Zainab to prove herself innocent and victim. How could she prove her innocence? Therefore, it could be inferred that she was denied the justice as per the Islamic law, and she becomes the subject to structural failures and must get ready to suffer from the blankness of the Shariah law. According to the novel, a ninety-year-old Qadi, who got retired from Saudia Sharia court since couple of years ago gave Islamic legal requirements to Zia regarding Zainab that she cannot fulfil Islamic legal requirements. He asserts “The law doesn't differentiate between those who can see and those who can't ... So, the victim, blind or not, is entitled to the same scrutiny” (pp.86-87). Therefore, she is accused of unlawful fornication. Hanif depicts Zainab, having been

imprisoned, and, because of flaw in the so-called Zia's version of Islamic laws, she has been sentenced to stoning to death as the first ever lady confronting this kind of death in the history of Pakistan. According to the novel, this unique and weird decision of her death grabbed international attention, which led to the criticism of Zia's version of justice system. The novel depicts Zia as the hypocrite mullah using religion for his own interests and gains rather than serving Islamic spirit. As Saleem (2015) writes, "Instead of recognizing the loop holes in the judicial system, they (the totalitarians) insist on the misuse and exploitation through the wrong interpretation and implementation of the (religious) principles" (p.225). This sort of flawed application of justice is seen in case of Zainab, which pushed her into the state of disposability and brutal outcomes of misinterpretation and misapplication of Shariah law resulting her body socio-civil dead.

Considering the described scenario, Zainab suffers from state of exceptions where Zia suspended the normal lawful and political process being a sovereign power without any restraint. It is revealed that Zainab has committed no crime, and she has been reflected as comfortable in the black cell (in Urdu called Kali Kothari) which was especially build to keep death row prisoners. Hanif satirizes the necro-political justice system of Pakistan saying "She lived in it as if it was her home" (p.210). She further states that "I want to die here" (p.213). Zainab finds relief and solace in prison which protects her from further misuse, she considered herself protected that at least she may not be raped behind the bars. The rascals roaming in the society may not reach to rape her again. In this confinement, she may hold sovereignty over her body, if be it for a shorter period of her life. In addition, when her story reaches from the iron bars to the international newspapers, Zia particularly gets disturbed and commands her to be relocated from jail to fort which is particularly used by intelligence officers for the extrajudicial activities. The transportation signifies that such kind of victims have been kept in unknown and dark places, so that no international media could see and highlight the adverse face of Zia's regime. Zainab's unique existence of socio-civil death is like of anomie and chaos, a space devoid of law where all legal determinations are deactivated. For this, the propaganda as tools of necro-political control has also been used by him. Hanif writes, General Zia realized that because of international publicity of the case, he rebukes his propagandist Information Minister saying "what are you waiting for? Put out a press release and tell them all this fuss about the blind woman is Jewish propaganda. And next time we got to America invite Sulzberger (the publisher of the news) for lunch. Take a large Persian carpet for him" (p.85). By these lines, it is revealed that Zia has put on a mask of being pious and honest, manipulated the situation using the religious discourse, propagating it as a Jewish propaganda, he suppressed the voice of disposable Zainab. Jewish propaganda means the propaganda of those who are not Muslims. By this, he denied the justice for her by manipulating religious discourses through Information Minister. In this context, Mbembe (2003) states, "sovereignty ... is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human ... populations" (p.14). Zainab's existence is that of mere instrument, and could be destructed and marginalized through regulating social-civil death on her. According to Kalish (1968) social death as a phenomenon of sociological, psychological and physical where a body believes that he/she is as good as dead. Analysing Zainab not mere a victim but more than that, the disposable subject, who suffers from social and civil death, she lives in a very unique kind of existence termed death-world. On one side, her existence as a woman in the society is not like those of other women depicted in the text like that of Zia's wife. She being a socio-civil dead, foregrounds the intersection of her disability, gender subservience and power dynamics in authoritarian rule. She becomes the symbol of vulnerability of women. Her abuse is doubled through oppressive justice system and patriarchal structure which fails to secure her rights and find social justice for her. Zia's dark era is the symbol of suppression and misuse of religion to have

control and in this regard Zainab's unique social existence serves as blunt instance of individual's violence and injustice preserved during his era. Zainab's comfort in jail presents the irony of her existence. She finds shelter being imprisoned for punished unjustly by dint of the crime she has not committed. The decision of transferring her to the fort reflects her importance as trash which may lead her to more abuse and exploitation under the guise of unofficial actions. In a nut shell, Zainab's this sort of survival presents injustice, dehumanizing effects, social and civil death. Her representation serves as distressing example of dictator's unchecked supreme power and the weakness of marginalized individuals. Rendering her powerless by the force of political, legal, and social institutions.

Conclusion

The study concludes through the aforementioned investigation that Zainab has suffered from socio-civil death, signifying her legal and existential deletion, reinforcing necro-political structures dictating who may live and who must die. There was no existence of laws to satisfactorily treat the nature of rape leaving her without Islamic legal recourse. Similarly, being a woman, she suffers from loss of identity, relational ties, and agency through systematic oppression. She bargains her protection within prison bars, knowing the fact that she may not be socially accepted in Pakistani society as victim of rape. Above all, the dictatorial laws also deprived her of bodily autonomy, civil rights and life, exposing the in-depth failed legal systems exploiting and disposing the most vulnerable woman. Through her character, Hanif exposed the misuse of Islamized version of law by Zia. This sort of Islamization was prolonged beyond the legal reforms, reaching the other sectors of the society. In sum the research positions *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* as a critical literary text that not only critiques authoritarian governance but also engages with global discussions on state violence, biopolitical control, and socio-civil death. Ultimately, this study reaffirms that necro-politics is not merely a theoretical construct but a lived reality, deeply embedded in the sociopolitical fabric of Pakistan. The selected novel provides a critical lens through which to examine the ongoing struggles against systemic violence, offering profound insights into the precarious existence of marginalized communities under necro-power.

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