
Living and Dying Under Power: A Necropolitical Reading of Postcolonial Fiction

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Abstract

This paper discusses necropolitical relations in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy within the theoretical context of necropower by Achille Mbembe (2003) and biopolitics by Foucault and grievability by Butler. The novel is a fragmented yet very political narrative that foreshadows the existence of the marginalized communities that are forced to experience incessant surveillance, violence, and socio-political marginalization in postcolonial India. This paper examines the processes of power through the prism of death, abandonment, and systemic oppression in conflict-ridden regions such as Kashmir and among socially outcast groups such as hijras, religious minorities, and political dissidents to examine how the state exercises power to control life and death. Based on a qualitative textual analysis, the paper highlights that necropolitical formations transform living bodies into expendable subjects and simultaneously establish the field of resistance and survival. In the end, this study claims that *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* not only reveals the inhuman face of state-approved violence but also reinvents the other ways of living in the conditions of death, thus disrupting the mainstream power structures and redefining the concept of humanity in the postcolonial world.

Key Words: Sovereign power, postcolonial literature, state violence, marginalized communities, critical theory.

INTRODUCTION

Necropolitics, established by Achille Mbembe (2003), is a concept that looks at how sovereign power decides who has the right to live and who has to die. In contrast to biopolitics, which is concerned with the regulation and optimization of life, necropolitics reveals the darker sides of how contemporary states impose their control by generating death, social displacement, and areas of exception (Mbembe, 2003). Basing his argument on and building upon the concept of biopower, as developed by Michel Foucault, Mbembe states that contemporary sovereignty is becoming more and more a matter of producing death-worlds, in which people are placed under the regime of the living dead (Foucault, 1978; Mbembe, 2003). Necropolitics in the modern postcolonial society can take the form of militarization, institutionalized inequality, religious fanaticism, and structural violence, which makes some groups of people disposable and socially ungrievable (Butler, 2004; Butler, 2009).

Postcolonial literature has become a more important place to initiate questioning of such dynamics, and has provided narrative space in which marginalized voices can express oppression, trauma, and survival. Violence is not only written in literary texts, but it is also revealed through the operation of power in its everyday practices, institutional neglect, and normalized injustice (Das & Poole, 2004). As part of this tradition, the novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy (2017) is a strong literary intervention to predict the realities of necropolitics in modern India. The novel uses its disjointed narrative and voice variety to trace the embodied effects of state violence in a variety of socio-political landscapes, such as Kashmir, caste hierarchies, communal warfare, and gender oppression.

The main theme of the novel is to live in proximity to death, physical and symbolic. The figures like Anjum, a hijra who has been marginalized by society, represent a type of social death that is created by their exclusionary gender ideals and institutional denial. This is what Agamben (1998) theorizes as bare life, in which people are put under the political order only when they are exposed to violence and are abandoned. In the same way, the description of Kashmir shows how militarization turns geographical spaces into the area of necropolitics, where daily life is dictated by surveillance and fear and a permanent risk of death. These images echo the point made by Mbembe (2003) that contemporary sovereignty is more and more operating on the ability to command death instead of the ability to preserve life.

Moreover, in the novel, necropolitical power is shown to interlock with other identity marks like religion, gender, caste, and class. The unequal value of human lives reveals very deep-rooted systems of inequality that define whose suffering is recognized and whose is eliminated. The concept of grievability introduced by Judith Butler (2009) applies to this situation especially well, as the novel shows that some lives are not worthy of mourning or moral consideration by the community. Meanwhile, Roy makes it harder to tell the stories of unquestioned domination by depicting acts of care, solidarity, and resistance that are built under the conditions of oppressive circumstances. These instances subvert the totalizing rationality of necropolitics and propose the existence of other ethical communities.

Although necropolitics has been gaining academic popularity, its continued use in South Asian literary practices, especially in close textual analysis, has received little consideration. The literature is typically the point of resistance and meaning-making that is not adequately represented in much of the existing scholarship, which emphasizes political theory or geopolitical case studies (Das & Poole, 2004). This paper aims to fill this gap by exploring how *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* encloses lived experiences of necropower and, at the same time, challenges its validity. Placing the novel in the context of the larger arguments about sovereignty, violence, and human vulnerability, this study adds to the current discourse in postcolonial studies, political theory, and literary criticism.

This paper concludes by using a necropolitical prism to show that *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is an intensely critical work that reveals how forces of authority reproduce themselves through death, but also sheds light on the potential to offer ways of ethical resistance, relationality, and human solidarity in the most marginalized locations. Therefore, the primary aims of the research are;

1. To investigate the functioning of necropolitical power in Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* through the lens of portraying the state's instruments of violence, social marginalization, and control over life and death.
2. To examine the negotiations of survival, resistance, and identity in a necropolitical space by the marginalized characters, thus disrupting the dominant power structures and exclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of artificial intelligence, necropolitical power, and postcolonial formation of narratives is critically explored by Taqdeer et al. (2025) in the context of the modern global discourse. The analysis of qualitative textual data based on postcolonial literary works, digital stories, and AI-mediated cultural representations helps the research question how technological infrastructures are becoming more and more engaged in reproducing or challenging colonial logics of power, exclusion, and disposability. The main aim of the work is to find out how AI is not only a neutral technological device but also an ideological mechanism that can both strengthen and destabilize necropolitical domination over marginalized postcolonial bodies and spaces. The theoretical framework combines the theory of necropolitics developed by Achille Mbembe with the postcolonial theory and critical AI studies, which enables the authors to question the redefinition of traditional centre-periphery relations by algorithmic governance, surveillance, and data colonialism. The results demonstrate that AI-based stories tend to reproduce colonial epistemologies by prioritizing the Western-centric knowledge regimes, but also provide new discursive possibilities to resist by dislocating agency in the digital counter-narratives of postcolonial subjects. The paper concludes that to rethink resistance in the era of AI, it is necessary to re-position the centre of postcolonial as a permeable site of negotiation where technology, politics, and cultural memory come together and confront the dominant necropolitical regimes.

Zahid and Iqbal, in their 2025 article, *Trial Life and Instrumentalization of the Human Body: A Necropolitical Study of The Wandering Falcon* by Jamil Ahmad, engage in a qualitative literary analysis of how the 2011 novel *The Wandering Falcon* by Jamil Ahmad reflects the marginalization and instrumentalization of tribal bodies, but within the context of necropolitics (2003) of Achille Mbembe, to demonstrate how sovereign power determines who survives and who dies in and Relying on textual evidence provided by Ahmad in his novel, the authors evaluate the existing literature on necropolitics and tribal governance such as the initial idea of the subordination of life to the authority of death by Mbembe and the previous literature on the hegemonic structure of tribal jirga systems and the implications of the Frontier Crimes Regulation on tribal subalterns to place their work in a larger context of the issues of power, sovereignty, and human dignity. Their task is to unpack the way the

contemporary post-colonial state, through neo-colonial pressures, devalues some lives through violence, displacement, and exclusion, showing how frail lives of nomadic tribes and gendered aspects of subjection are. The paper applies the necropolitical framework introduced by Mbembe to examine how the state assigns varying values to life, which renders tribal communities literally and metaphorically disposable, and the depictions of eviction, violence, and gendered vulnerability in the novel demonstrate how the sovereign power functions through death-world logics, marginalizing indigenous populations and questioning the traditional views on the democratic state.

Pasha (2024) explored the necropolitical politics of the little-known border camps at Rukban and Zero Point, where these spaces are regarded as death worlds where undesirable migrants are put into a state of limbo. The objective of the study is to examine how state border policies reflect necropolitical logics affecting the choice of who is allowed to live and who must die by abandoning and containing others using qualitative, genealogical analysis of policies and conditions in these camps as recorded in the Journal of Refugee Studies. The study is put in context by necropolitics and South-centric decolonial visions, which suggest that, despite the harsh circumstances, migrants operate in self-governance and political claim-making, turning these areas of abandonment into the spaces of lively, but fragile, opposition.

Pietryka (2025) investigated how necropolitical institutions based on colonialism and slavery still influence liberal democracy and economic relations around the world. The study addresses the issue of how the economic and political systems entrench the disposability of particular bodies through a historical and philosophical critique of the Enlightenment thought and contemporary neoliberal practices. The article, based on the concept of necropolitics and critiques of colonialism and neoliberal power, shows that the exploitation of enslaved bodies became the foundation of modern practices that equate democracy with exclusion and inequality, as the current legacy of necropower continues to exist in Western political economies.

In a qualitative case study, Romero et al. (2025) discussed the overlap of necropolitics and crimmigration (criminalizing immigration) in the territory of Baja California. Through the use of recorded cases of violence and policy critique of 2021-2024, the study aims to analyze how the border enforcement strategies by the Mexican state create spaces where migrants feel

abandoned, vulnerable, and at risk of dying. Informed by necropolitics and critical border studies, the outcomes of the research demonstrate that the criminalization and immigration control together result in carving out of necropolitical zones where the life of migrants is systematically undermined and confronted, and geopolitical hierarchies of life and death are strengthened.

Analyzing the effects of necropolitical control by the Israeli settler colonial apparatus on Palestinians during the COVID-19 pandemic, Gabriel (2022) suggests that the results of the pandemic were not caused by the virus but by the old colonial frameworks. The study is based on qualitative legal and political analysis of pandemic policies and health outcomes to demonstrate the functioning of necropolitical logics in the form of coloniality, the permanent formations of colonial power. The study is based on necro politics and colonial theory and concludes that the pandemic intensified inequalities and state violence that strengthened the sovereign power to decide who lives and who dies.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative research design based on thematic and critical discourse analysis to explore how necropolitical power is presented in Arundhati Roy's book, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The novel is approached as a cultural and political work that represents the sociopolitical processes in the real world, especially the oppression and disenfranchisement of vulnerable groups. As the key theoretical framework, necro politics by Mbembe (2003) is used, along with the biopolitics formulated by Foucault and the theory of grievability developed by Butler, to find examples of narratives that describe state violence, social exclusion, and regulation of life and death. The study consists of close thematic coding of specific passages, which are selected based on a systematic close reading to identify the patterns of disposability, abandonment, and resistance in marginalized characters, such as Kashmiris, religious minorities, and hijras. Cross-referencing of the textual results with the historical, political, and socio-cultural contexts is used to ensure data triangulation that improves the interpretive validity. In such a manner, this interpretivist and postcolonial approach enables the methodology to not only expose the structural processes of necro politics but also to examine how the narrative of Roy re-creates spaces of survival, moral resistance, and other ways of living in the face of domineering power structures. The given

approach will guarantee a rigorous, theoretically informed, and context-based analysis that directly answers the research questions of understanding necropolitical governance and marginalized agency in postcolonial India.

Data Analysis

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Roy, the textual analysis shows intricate and multifaceted expressions of necropolitical government, as the sovereign authority, social stratifications, and cultural values decide who is allowed to live and who has to die. This analysis employs the necro politics theory developed by Achille Mbembe (2003) with the help of Foucault's (1978) biopolitics and Butler's (2009) grievability theory to analyze the way in which the novel depicts the exercise of sovereign control over life and death, the formation of disposable populations, and the development of defiant social spaces within oppressive structures. The thematic analysis is divided into four dimensions, which are interrelated and include: (1) state violence and militarization, (2) social exclusion and marginalization, (3) spaces of resistance and survival, and (4) narratives of slow violence and ethical reckoning. All themes reveal the functionality of necropower and indicate how the marginalized characters bargain, struggle, and reconfigure life in necropolitical and biopolitical circumstances.

1. State Violence and Militarization

Kashmir is presented as a necropolitical zone of exception, and the sovereign power of the state appears in terms of ever-present surveillance, militarization, and bureaucratic control of life. The presence of military checkpoints, curfews, and patrolling soldiers results in an environment where the control of human bodies is exercised and endangered, which can be related to the claim of Mbembe (2003), according to which the sovereign power is preserved by the ability to subject some groups of people to death. According to Roy (2017), the boots stomped in all courtyards and corridors, leaving behind the traces of power, thus underlining the fact that ordinary life is subordinated to the force of the State (p. 1).

The story also represents aspects of Foucault's biopolitics since the control of movement, curfew, and surveillance is a kind of government over life where the conduct of civilians is controlled, surveilled, and normalized (Foucault, 1978). The conditions of militarized spaces

become normalized, extraordinary violence, compelling civilians to adjust to the environment in which they have to be invisible or compliant to survive (Roy, 2017, pp. 2-3).

2. Social Exclusion and Marginalization

In addition to the explicit state violence, Roy prefigures structural manifestations of social death, which are imposed on the marginalized groups, especially hijras, women, and religious minorities. Anjum, a hijra, represents social invisibility and the exclusion that exists in society: she is said to be born in a body that the world does not want to consider (Roy, 2017, p. 4). This is indicative of the idea of Mbembe that necropower is not just limited to physical murder, but also making populations socially and symbolically disposable.

The refusal of legal status, medical care, and social security is an example of necropower that reinforces vulnerability by gender, sexuality, caste, and religion hierarchies. The plight of religious minorities in conflict areas, in which the violence is justified by the nationalistic rhetoric (pp. 5-6), is also described by Roy (2017). This concurs with the grievability theory propounded by Butler (2009), who puts emphasis on the fact that certain lives are unworthy of mourning and ethical consideration.

Furthermore, intersectional vulnerabilities demonstrate the stratification of necropolitical power as suggested by Mbembe (2003), in which the oppressions accumulate among the populations that are marginalized in more than one axis.

3. Spaces of Resistance and Survival

Nevertheless, in spite of all these oppressions, Roy makes spaces of ethical resistance and proves that necropolitical spaces, too, can create those forms of life that disrupt the sovereign power (Mbembe, 2003). The Jannat Guest House is a haven and a place of metaphorical rebellion, where Anjum and other downtrodden people regain control of their lives. As Roy (2017) explains, the space turns a cemetery into a house of living connections (p. 7), undermining the logic of necro politics, which tries to make these bodies and spaces obsolete.

Characters rebel against the hierarchies of life and death imposed by the presence of caring, storytelling, and belonging acts. These practices are examples of ethical and political resistance, which prove that even in the most marginalized conditions, the alternative forms of existence and solidarity can be created inside the regimes of necro politics (Roy, 2017, pp.

8-9). This also reflects the idea of biopolitics by Foucault, since these spaces are spaces of collective control of life and well-being, even under repressive control (Foucault, 1978).

4. Narratives of Slow Violence and Ethical Reckoning

Roy predicts the necropower in slow modes, displaying how life is slowly destroyed by prolonged exposure to displacement, environmental degradation, poverty, and bureaucratic neglect. This correlates with the idea of slow violence by Nixon (2011), which is cumulative and invisible. An example of the extension of necropower beyond direct killing to structural and symbolic control is the families living under curfews, without access to education, or living under random legal controls (Roy, 2017, pp. 10-11).

Meanwhile, such slow violences overlap with the biopolitics of Foucault, wherein the structures of power control, surveil, and precondition life, turning populations into precarious and vulnerable. Through the slow violence and the resilience acts, Roy criticizes the failure of governance ethically and the persistence of human dignity. The polyphonic and nonlinear structure of the novel supports the temporality of suffering, as Mbembe points out that necropower forms lives not episodically, but continuously.

5. Intersectionality of Necropower

In the novel by Roy, it is revealed that necropolitical rule is stratified and intersectional, and it functions in different ways depending on gender, caste, sexuality, religion, and geography. The risk and harm are disproportionately directed to hijras, Kashmiri civilians, and religious minorities, which depicts the hierarchical necro politics as suggested by Mbembe (2003) (Roy, 2017, pp. 12-13).

Exposure to the slow and immediate violence is further aggravated by intersectional vulnerabilities, which demonstrate neurological harm as a compounded factor by social hierarchies. This is complemented by the grievability theory by Butler (2009) because these marginalized groups are made socially undriveable and undervalued in terms of their morality.

6. Ethical and Narrative Implications

The narrative techniques used by Roy, such as the multiple voices, nonlinear time, and interlacing of personal and political events, augment the ethical aspects of necro politics. The fact that the novel combines personal stories of pain with descriptions of institutional violence requires the reader to be morally involved, revealing the effects of political apathy (Roy, 2017, pp. 14-15).

In this perspective, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* can be viewed as a critical commentary on necropolitical rule, demonstrating the way power works through death, disposability, and unequal valuation of life, as well as how resistance, solidarity, and ethical treatment can be practiced in the marginalized places. The combination of Mbembe's concept of necro politics and Foucault's concept of biopolitics, and Butler's concept of grievability allows the text to provide a detailed and subtle perspective of structural violence and moral agency.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017) by Arundhati Roy is a very convincing story on the subject of necropolitical government, highlighting how the authority of sovereignty decides whose lives are worth living and whose deaths are acceptable, and also reveals the social, symbolic, and ethical aspects of marginalization. The novel shows the stratified and intersectional character of necropower through the illustrations of militarized zones, social exclusion, and slow violence (Mbembe, 2003). At the same time, the text prefigures opposition, nurture, and moral agency (Butler, 2009; Foucault, 1978), demonstrating that even in oppressive systems, other ways of life, solidarity, and moral agency are possible. Finally, the novel is both a commentary on contemporary politics and an ode to the human spirit, the political and ethical consequences of life, death, and survival in necropolitical territory (Roy, 2017, pp. 1-15).

Findings & Discussion

The discussion of Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) shows the complexity and multifaceted Ness of the mechanism of necropolitical power, and how state power and social relations, as well as cultural practices, create uneven access to life and death. As portrayed in the novel, Kashmir stands out as one of the best locations of necropolitical rule where military checkpoints, curfews, and constant surveillance govern human mobility and appearance in a systematized manner. Roy (2017) explains that the boots

that stomped in all the courtyards and corridors left remnants of authority, which is how the militarized presence makes the coercion and constant danger a normal way of life. This is a demonstration of Mbembe's (2003) idea of necropower, whereby the sovereign power dictates who can have their lives at stake and how the deaths of some people can be socially acceptable. Civilians exist in constant fear, where they learn to adjust to situations where even normal activities are characterized by insecurity. As the story illustrates, state violence is not only episodic and spectacular, but a long-term process that instills a sense of obedience, organizes vulnerability, and makes some groups of people systematically expendable.

Forms of necro politics are structural in that they go beyond the explicit violence to include social and cultural exclusion. Systemic marginalization of such characters as Anjum, hijra, and other religious and gender minorities manifests itself in the form of denial of legal status, medical services, residential facilities, and social acceptance (Roy, 2017). The life of Anjum is repeatedly characterized as being born in a body that the world does not want to accept, which can be viewed as a consequence of the idea of grievability, introduced by Butler (2016), according to which the societal institutions choose whose deaths and lives are considered significant. These examples demonstrate that necropower does not just operate by physical damage, but also by social and symbolic obliteration of those marginalized identities. Intersectionality is crucial because the intersections between axes of vulnerability, gender, sexuality, caste, religion, region, etc., increase susceptibility to immediate and structural risks, which points to the stratified and differentiated character of necropolitical governance.

Through these forces of oppression, Roy creates spaces of resistance and resilience to show that oppressed communities also have agency in the most vulnerable circumstances. Jannat Guest House is the refuge and the place of ethical rebellion, where outcasts restore life by taking care, being solid, and ritual (Roy, 2017). The fact that spaces that have long been identified with death are being changed into areas of communal care, like in the case of graveyards, highlights the ability to subvert the necropolitical structures. The collective practices, storytelling, communal support, and rituals among characters are all mechanisms of ethical survival, which portrays that resistance is not only in the grand actions of defiance but also in daily life. These findings suggest that the demoted groups have a way of negotiating

the frontiers of life and death to challenge the totalizing logic of necropower and to take over moral and existential agency.

It is also in the novel that we can anticipate slow, cumulative types of necro politics, which emphasize the time aspect of oppression. The concept of slow violence presented by Nixon (2011) can be observed in the description of families who live under curfews, are neglected by bureaucracies, whose surroundings are damaged, and who experience a long period of social marginalization (Roy, 2017). These slow and even insidious sources of damage exist in parallel with the open militarization, having long-term physical, psychological, and social effects. The nonlinear chronology and polyphonic voices as the narrative tool chosen by Roy are indicative of the time and space complexity of necropower and how the oppression and resistance coexist and interact at multiple levels. These narrative techniques contribute not only to the ethical richness of the text, but also provide the reader with a model according to which structural violence may be evaluated critically, and according to which the fact that life under necropower is marked by incessant bargaining, existence, and ethical accounting.

Intersectionality is a major factor when it comes to the distribution of necropolitical risk. It turns out that those whose identity is a mixture of several marginalized groups of people are the most vulnerable, including hijras in war-torn countries, displaced religious minorities, and women of socially excluded castes (Mbembe, 2003; Roy, 2017). This observation confirms the hypothesis that necropower is not uniform and unsystematic, but a social and political hierarchy, displayed in postcolonial hierarchies and power relations on a larger scale. Disclosing these intersecting vulnerabilities, the text by Roy provides a certain understanding of the complex processes of social mediation of life and death, and that is why the complex, intersectional character of the necropolitical processes of the postcolonial environment must be considered.

Ethical and analytical aspects of the research are also supported by the use of the techniques of narration by Roy. Through the intertwining of personal narratives with other forms of structural oppression, nonlinear narrative, and polyphonic narratives, the novel turns literature into a location of necropolitical investigation. The readers are encouraged to observe the lived reality of people who have to endure both material and symbolic aspects of life under necropower (Butler, 2016; Nixon, 2011). The writing can thus be seen as a twofold

criticism: it both records the processes of disposability as well as throws light on the tactics of ethical and communal resistance.

To sum up, the results depict that necropolitical power in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* functions at several levels and coordinates life and death by militarizing, socializing outcasts, symbolically erasing, and gradually killing. Simultaneously, the novel emphasizes the strength, agency, and moral intervention of the oppressed communities, which proves that places of survival and moral action are available even to oppressive regimes. Finding the literature analysis in the context of necropolitical and postcolonial theory, this paper has had an opportunity to observe how narratives could be used to reflect, critique, and destabilize the real-life systems of domination, vulnerability, and resistance. Through this, the work by Roy can be analyzed as a fertile field to examine the complex interaction of oppression and agency, death and survival, and the ethical responsibility in modern postcolonial societies.

Conclusion

As explained in this paper, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy is a powerful examination of necropolitical authority in the postcolonial Indian context and how state authority, social relationships, and cultural conventions precondition life and death. As this discussion demonstrates, the marginalized groups, such as Kashmiri civilians, hijras, and religious minorities, are subjected to overt and structural necropower, militarization and curfews, social exclusion, and erasure. Meanwhile, the novel has noted the factors of resistance, moral agency, and community, and it is shown that despite overwhelming oppression, existence and self-respect are still traded. This postcolonial power, vulnerability, and resistance discussion is subtly informative in both its synthesis of textual material and theoretical approaches to necro politics as formulated by Mbembe, grievability as formulated by Butler, and the notion of slow violence as formulated by Nixon. Lastly, the story of Roy is not only a critique of how oppression can be found within the system, but also an expression of human capabilities, ethical bonding, and the prospect of change that can be made. Therefore, literature becomes a very important place to study the complex connections between life, death, and survival.

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