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Resistance against Necropolitics: A Study of Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams*

Sita Ram Bhatta (MPhil)

Kailali Multiple Campus, Dhangadhi

Far Western University, Nepal

Email: bhattasitara5@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the exercise of necropower by the Americans on the South Asians, especially the Muslims, in the aftermath of 9/11. The purpose of the study is to expose how the Americans (ab)used their social and political power on the lives of the Muslim migrants, making it difficult for them to exist in the host land, that is, the US. For this purpose the study analyzes the narrative data from Sheila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* (2009). In the novel, the pregnant protagonist Arissa Illahi suffers racial hatred and discrimination while she was undergoing the trauma of losing her husband in the Twin Tower attack of 9/11. Drawing upon the concept of necropolitics by Achille Mbembe, the study discusses how the so-called advanced society of the USA is limited to parochialism of White supremacy. The paper focuses on how the events of 'September 11' resulted in the cultural clash between the West and the Muslim world, and how the fighters of the so-called War on Terror were exacerbating the terror through their conduct of Islamophobia. It concludes with a note that one can survive being committed to and taking help of art and creation in spite of social vulnerability.

Keywords: Necropolitics, racial discrimination, resistance, September 11

Introduction: Text and Context

Saffron Dreams (2009) is a diasporic novel by a Pakistani-American author Shaila Abdullah. It deals with the story of a young Pakistani woman Arissa Illahi who gets married in Karachi to a young man named Faizan, a graduate of Columbia University. She then goes to the USA with her husband. Unfortunately, she comes to know one day that Faizan was killed in the Twin Tower attacks of September 11, 2001. Then the Western governments, their mainstream media, and common people

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became aggressive against the Muslims, homogenizing all the Muslims to be the same as the attackers. Arissa was nearly stabbed by some teenage American boys blaming that she belonged to the race of ‘the Twin Tower destroyers’. She narrowly escaped it. Then she was picked up and thrown down, which resulted in the physical injury of her baby in the womb.

After this physical assault and many other incidents of racial harassment, she has to shrink within her home. She is mentally ill, taking anti-depressant drugs. Her social life is ruined. It distanced her from her circle of friends and relatives. When she gave birth to the baby, the boy was physically and mentally unhealthy due to the assaults on the mother. Later, Arissa has to quit her hijab, change her tone of language into American and modify herself in the manner of the Americans. Many of the Muslims changed their names, shaved their beard, and stopped talking in their mother tongue. Existence for Muslims was difficult. Torture and death for Muslims was common. In such critical condition, she saw the face of the baby, who was a precious memory from Faizan. She committed to complete Faizan’s half-written book *Soul Searcher*. As she decided to complete the book and rear the baby, she got new source of energy to come out of the sorrow and revitalize her. While the US government was engaged in War on Terror across the Atlantic to ‘defend’ democracy, and human rights, migrants like Arissa Illahi were experiencing most undemocratic and inhuman treatment from the Whites in their nation. Although Americans were terrorizing her and attempting to impose death on her, she controlled her life and resisted the potential death. In such a context, this paper attempts to explore and expose the Americans’ power exercise for her (social) death and her strategies for survival.

Theoretical Framework

Necropolitics is the evil exercise of power that takes away people’s (social) life or leading them to death. The concept of ‘necropolitics’ is discussed by a Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe. He built up this idea from Foucauldian concept of biopower suggesting it to be “that domain of life over which power has asserted its control” (Mbembe, 2019, p. 66). Foucault (1984) contends that biopower “appears to function by dividing people into those who must die and who must live” (p. 71). Favoring one group of people to ‘live’ and discarding others to ‘die’ in the name of race is a practice of racism. For such practice on the lives of population, as Mbembe (2019) cites and endorses Hanna Arendt, “racism” is a significant tool applied by biopower: “that old sovereign right to kill” (p. 71). For Mbembe (2019), “the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the state’s murderous functions” (p. 71). Racism was, for example, exercised by the Americans after 9/11 incident, and differently practiced by the British colonizers

in the past, where they were involved in ‘distribution of death’ and ‘murderous functions’. In Mbembe’s reading, racism has been a shadow always hovering over the Western political thought and practice when it comes to dominating the foreigners (p.71). The Western power holders applied all forms of power against those in their influence in the name of counter-terrorism or civilization. They are diplomatic, economic, military, media, and political. Mbembe’s statement is relevant against this backdrop: “Power (which is not necessarily state power) continuously refers and appeals to the exceptions, emergencies and fictionalized enemies” (p. 70). Muslims became ‘fictionalized enemies’ for the Americans.

Europeans practiced ‘democracy’ but that age of reason and democracy came intertwined with guillotine, and terror is taken as necessary part of politics when we discuss French Revolution. In modern times, in the colonies Europeans exercised their politics “outside the law” and in their civilizing mission they waged “endless war” (Mbembe, 2019, p. 76). In the name of judicial order, they exercised “an equality that was notably applied to *the right to wage war* (the taking of life)” (Mbembe, 2019, pp.76-77) in which ‘killing’ or ‘concluding peace’ was supposed to function of any state, accordingly they civilized or rationalized the way of killing.

The next important idea I have brought into the mainstream of my article is the concept of resistance, too. Resistance is defiance to oppression or something unfair. Carr, C. Lynn defines resistance “engaging in behaviors despite opposition” (as cited in Hollander and Einwohner, 2004, p. 534). In the words of Profitt (1997) resistance is “active efforts to oppose, fight, and refuse to cooperate with or submit to . . . abusive behavior and. . .control” (p. 534). Resistance can be overt, covert, unwitting, and passive and so on. Since necropolitics is an exercise of power on others’ life and death, resistance is complementary to it. Foucault’s expression finds appropriate space here, “Where there is power there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (as cited in Hollander & Einwohner, 2004, p. 548). In this light, American citizens’ inappropriate use of racial power and Arissa’s resistance to her capacity are mapped in the discussion.

Literature Review

Saffron Dreams has been studied and analyzed by various scholars from various perspectives. Most critics have focused on the issue of identity and trauma of the protagonist. Joshi (2019) in her Master’s Degree thesis investigates ‘the diasporic identity formation and pain of being dislocated in an alien land’ into the novel. She studies “the trauma of Muslim life [...] imprinted in Illahi’s memory” (Joshi, 2019, p. 51). Herself a victim of 9/11 attack, Arissa is physically and mentally

tortured by the white Americans and was nearly dead. Joshi's conclusion is that "internal and external factors such as contingency of truth, society, history, power politics, and culture affect "the autonomy of identity" (Joshi, 2019, p. 27). That's why, Arissa's identity is in flux: "flexible, constructed, reconstructed, altered, and ephemeral" (Joshi, 2019, p. 27). Her movement from Pakistan to America created changes in her identity.

Chowdhury (2018) also focuses on the struggle of Arissa, and highlights how she overcomes the tough times in a foreign land and raises her child. She shows how Arissa lost her husband in 9/11 terror attack, and instead of getting sympathy, how she received "hatred and animosity" from the American teenage boys just because she was a Muslim (Chowdhury, 2018, p. 54). It is a racial assault on migrants conducted by the fellow Americans.

Sarror (2019), another scholar shows the hatred and anger against the Muslim community who were "regarded as terrorists" and became "one of the most targeted groups" after 9/11 (p. 622). Focusing on Arissa's pain he writes, "Although she loses her husband in this attack, but she is also regarded as a terrorist due to her Muslim identity" (Sarror, 2019, p. 622). Widowhood itself is the state of trauma, and she needs special care, but Arissa Illahi was given verbal and physical torture. The comment of Sarror (2019) aptly expresses it:

[T]hough the group of boys knows that Arissa is pregnant and has also lost her husband that day but they continue assaulting her and attempt to slice her. They failed to stab her and then they lifted her and dropped her to the ground, falling on her belly. Due to this attack, her unborn baby was seriously affected as the medical tests proved that it would be born disabled. Thus race conflict becomes explicit in the incident whereshe moves out of her apartment after bereavement period and is bullied and harassed by a clan of young American boys. This remark made Arissa to remove her veil that was a barrier between Muslim women and American society. Her decision to remove veil made her to suffer but that was the only option to survive in that society. Due to all these problems Arissa had psychological disorders and this too affected her child. This incident shows the hatred that Muslims in America had to face after 9/11 even though they were also victims as that of Americans. (pp. 627-28)

Sarror's comment not only justifies racial hatred against American Muslims but also says that the white boys attempted to take life of Arissa and her baby in the womb. The victims, i.e. the mother and the baby in the womb, narrowly escaped. Arissa had to 'remove her veil'; many male Muslims had to shave their beard. Their free

movement was also restricted due to fear of racial attacks. Sarror (2019) quotes the boys' dialogue from the novel, "The veil you wear... It's all a facade. You try to look pure, but you are evil inside. You are the nonbelievers, not us" to justify the racial misbehavior (p. 627). This expression echoes the dichotomy created and fueled by the Western politicians, media, literary writing, and cinema.

Like Joshi and Chowdhury, NurAsiyah (2020) has studied the issue of identity in *Saffron Dreams*. Her focus is on how Arissa Illahi negotiated her identity at the time of crisis just to survive: "Another way of negotiation is by hiding the real religious identity such as changing the name to western. They made of the story as if they followed American culture to make them save from the attack" (Asiyah, 2020, p. 85). It is to note here that subordinate class people normally 'compromise' for existence. That is their short-term strategy for survival.

The following extract from the novel shows how people were afraid to speak their native language, continue with their real identity and express their opinions, thus:

Those who did travel preferred to remain quiet during their journey and chose not to converse in their native language even among family members. A few close friends changed their names— *Salim* became *Sam*, *Ali* converted to *Alan*— in an attempt to hide identities. When asked their nationality, they offered evasive answers. We were homesick individuals in an adopted homeland. We couldn't break free from our origin, and yet we wanted to soar. The tension in our hearts left us suspended in the mid-air". (Abdullah, 2009, p. 60)

In order to survive at the adverse situation, the migrant Muslims had to change names, wear American-like clothes, speak in American tone and maintain hybrid identity. So their identity was in unprecedented crisis.

In his study of contemporary Pakistani-American fiction Azeem (2016) observes the Post-9/11 novels through the lens of Agamben's *Homo Sacer*. A homo sacer normally is someone separated from society and killed by anyone with impunity. Azeem sees post-9/11 USA "as placed in a "zone of indistinction", a space where law and lawlessness coexist, blur their boundaries and become indistinguishable from each other" (Azeem, 2016, p. 75). This paradox existed in the Post-9/11 USA. On the one hand, it had laws functioning, but side by side migrant had to face extremism of lawlessness. Citing Agamben (1998), he further writes, "*Homo sacer*, originally a term in Roman Law, implies a person ostracized from a civil society so that his killer does not face any legal punishment: *homo sacer* thus "... indicates ... a life that may be killed by anyone--an object of violence that exceeds the sphere both of law and of sacrifice"" (p. 75). Migrants, especially Muslim

migrants, were made to feel ostracized in Post-9/11 America. Like Arissa Illahi, a Muslim could be killed anytime.

Azeem (2016) cites and endorses Sunaina Marr Maira, after the implementation of the USA Patriot Act 2001, the American empire has conflated the internal and external, expanding its tentacles beyond its territory as well as targeting its own citizens” (Azeem, 2016, p. 76). He further comments that the American empire “turned inside against its own citizens” who were Muslims and South Asians (p. 76). That was the time when “(hyper)nationalism ha[d] been replaced by transnationalism” which severely hindered Pakistani-migrant citizens of the USA “through surveillance, detentions, and even torture” (p. 77). Agamben defines *homosacer* a person who can be killed but not sacrificed, and the violence against him does not “constitute sacrilege ... “ (Agamben, 1998, p. 82). Just like *homo sacer*, the protagonist Illahi is “abandoned” by law, and is “exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable” (Agamben, 1998, p. 28).

Agamben’s condition animates of the Pakistani immigrants in the USA Arissa, the protagonist in *Saffron Dreams*, in her interaction with a group of violent youths at the subway station. The security apparatus sets aside the law and controls the lives of the subjects in a juridical void. The state of exception, Agamben (2016) argues, has become a “permanent structure of juridico-political delocalization and dislocation” (p. 38). In this light, the loss of citizenship and basic human rights makes these Pakistani-Americans *homo sacer*; it is also the loss of belonging to the city, the “de-localization”, that makes them *homo sacer* (p. 68).

Chandio and Sangi (2020) analyze female agency of Muslim protagonist Arissa Illahi living in the USA as immigrant or ‘diasporan’ and expose how Muslim female protagonists like Arissa “negotiate” their female agency in “the third space” of host land in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks (Candio & Sangi, 2020, p. 35). Likewise, Nazeer and Connolly claim (2019) that Abdullah “establishes a unique identity for her protagonist that defies homogeneous identity categories of both native and host cultures” (Nazeer & Connolly, 2019, p. 65). In their reading, Arissa’s dropping of some features of Muslim identity and taking the Western culture “shows the complex process of identity formation for the South Asian Muslim women in the US” (p. 79).

Bhuyan (2018) in her article entitled “Contours of Resistance in Contemporary Pakistani American Fiction: A Study of Selected Texts” studies life in the USA as a Muslim woman after 9/11 in three contemporary novels by Pakistani-American authors. She claims, “Pakistani American fiction often works through

conflicting notions of culture, work, gender, and food habits” (p. 59). *Saffron Dreams* basically deals with the first three.

The brief survey of literature on *Saffron Dreams* and Pakistani American diasporic literature in general shows that there has been a lot of work done regarding identity, cultural misunderstanding, gender issues, but necropolitical issues in the novel haven't been explored so far. The article aims at fulfilling the gap.

Methods and Procedures

The study adopts qualitative methodology by utilizing narrative inquiry approach for analyzing and interpreting the selected primary text, i.e. *Saffron Dreams*. The basic assumption behind selecting qualitative mode of inquiry is the nature of my subject-matter that presumes reality is and can be socially constructed. The belief that literary texts and creation of an image through them can affect collective psyche and thereby social reality is in the core of the discourse. For that matter, it considers contextualization of literary production, that is, the social-political environment in which the literary text *Saffron Dreams* was written and published is seen relevant. It tries to investigate the author's perspectives and strategies about the critical existence of Muslims in the US. For this purpose, interpretation of the narrative data from the selected text has been carried out. Obviously, an ample study of the secondary sources from the journals, books, articles, and internet sources have been utilized to strengthen the analysis and see the gap in literature.

The analysis follows inductive approach by selecting key examples, events and themes to see a pattern that leads the research to a conclusion. Definitely, the findings are described for the clear presentation of the subject-matter.

I have tried my best to be as objective as possible. Due to the limitation of time, expenditure and resources the study is limited to exploration of 'Necropolitics' in the selected text. The other aspects of the novel under consideration are left to be investigated by further researchers.

To analyze the narrative data theoretical notion from Mbembe's *Necropolitics* (2019) have been used.

Results and Discussion

Illahi's personal and social lives encounter tough situations repeatedly. When she lost her husband in 9/11 incident, she was having trauma of widowhood. Her husband was “snatched away like he was never hers. He had left the world without a trace” (Abdullah, 2009, pp. 82-83). All her plans and dreams for future vanished. Due to the tension, she couldn't sleep at night without taking valium, anti-depressant pills.

In this bereavement period she was expecting a baby. She needed extra care and sympathy. But unfortunately, just the opposite happened to her. One day in a station a group of white teenagers bullied her. One of them took out his knife and aiming the point at her hijab tried “several times to stab her with the knife. However, the moment they notice[d] a man approaching the spot they le[ft] her crawling on her knees and screaming” (Abdullah, 2009, p.62). As a response to this baseless attack she says, “You are a moron. My religion doesn’t preach terror” (p. 62). This is ‘overt resistance’ by Arissa because it shows the “behavior that is visible and readily recognized by both targets and observers as resistance” (Hollanser & Einwohner, 2004, p. 545). At this the group returns to stab her but fails to do so due to the presence of some passerby. Instead, they pick[ed] her up and thr[e]w her to the ground. None of the passerby c[a]me to her rescue” (p. 62). This crime of the boyd had severe consequences. The unborn baby had “heart defect, urinary tract malformations, kidney abnormalities, and cleft chin” (Abdullah, 2009, p. 67). This incident was an encounter to death for both mother and the unborn baby.

Arissa and her baby are the survivors. In the words of Elias Canetti as cited by Mbembe (2019) “survivor is the one who, having stood in the path of death, having known many deaths and having been amid the fallen, is still alive” (p. 88). Arissa knew deaths of thousands of others apart from her husband; she herself stood on the path of death; and, she was one amid the fallen.

For an in-depth analysis of such misbehaviour, it is better to discuss historico-political milieu of the time.

The Al-Qaeda militants’ attacks on the World Trade Centre and other destinations in the USA on September 11, 2001 caused an angry backlash against the Muslims. It was reflected by George W. Bush, the then US president, when he announced on 20 September 2001 seeking support from the world community for his ‘War on Terror’, “You are either with us or you are with the terrorists” (cited in Jain, 2022, p. 24). Jain (2022) in her book *Thinking Past ‘Post-9/11’: Home, Nation, and Transnational desires in Pakistani English Novels and Hindi Films* notes the junior Bush’s announcement as a global crisis, “The fall of Twin Towers on September 11, 2001 has become one of the most significant markers of crisis for the Muslim migrants across the world” (p. 22). This ‘crisis’ was multifaceted. The Muslims were hated and attacked in political rhetorics, through mainstream Western media, in literature, in cinema, and at the level of the civilians. It led to a strong dichotomy between the West vs Muslims.

Politically,”when President Bush declared the ‘war on terror’ the logic of blowback was quickly noted” (Liao, 2013, p. 3). The US Congress passed The USA

Patriot Act to prevent further attacks on American citizens aiming at preserving life and liberty. In their global ‘war on terror’ “the American government attempted to unite the world” (p. 157). Countries like the UK, Canada, and India, stood with the US on the mission to counter-terrorism. Jain (2022) cites and endorses a comment by Bloodsworth-Lugo et al. on the political climate, “A consistent governmental rhetoric justifying these dualities and enmities ultimately aimed to “reify White Americanness” and the racialization of Muslim citizens, refugees and immigrants to reinforce securing anxieties around them” (Jain, 2022, p. 26). It divided world culturally, as Jain says, “The construction and reinforcement of the binaries of “Us vs Them”, “Self versus Other”, “White Americans versus Other” and “Christian versus Muslim”” (p. 26). It resulted in strong “xenophobia” (Langah, 2019, p. 64, xvi), namely “Islamophobia” (Langah, 2019, p. 64, xvi) all over the world. The situation polarized the world and invited the ‘clash of civilization’ that Samuel Huntington projected in the early 1990s. Writers and commentators started creating image of Islam “as barbaric”, “uncultured” and “uncivilized” (Langah, 2019, p. 29). This generalization became common among grassroots.

The political rhetoric was carried on by the pro-war media. September 11 was a “televised event” that “took place in front of a global public” (Gray, 2011, p. 6). Langah writes that “media has stereotyped the image of Muslims and Christians through cultural symbolism” (Langah, 2019, p. 6). The Western literary response was in the same line which engaged with “the oppositional tone of the cultural hegemonic language by reinforcing the dominant non-fictional rhetoric of the international media” (Langah, 2019, p. 27). The discourse created by the British and American literature was characterized by “hatred and antagonism against Muslims and Islam”, for example DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007) and John Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006). DeLillo (2007), Updike (2006) and other authors attempted to “equate Islam with terror” (p. 72). In the same line Hollywood movies on 9/11 “turn[ed] the other into a demon”, and this ‘other’ was mostly a Muslim (Updike, 2006, p. 121). Mobilizing its military force, the USA attacked on the Muslim countries like Afghanistan and Iraq as a fight to so-called terrorism.

The impact of this all was in the Western civilians, who attacked the Muslims residing in the US and the UK. Langah (2019) notes, “The Muslims have been ostracized in the Western countries where they live, hate crimes have been conducted against them” (p. 122). There were “racist attacks” on Muslims, Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrants (Liao, 2020, p. 6). They were beaten.

This narrative against Muslims and South Asian migrants was openly criticized and protested by authors like Noam Chomsky. He called the former US

presidents “gangsters” who were responsible for the loss of so many innocent lives in the name of ‘defending democracy’ (Shawn, 2004, p. 11). Some South Asian authors like Salman Rushdie in *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), Kunzru in *Transmission* (2004), Monica Ali in *Brick Lane* (2003), Mohsin Hamid in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) protested this attitude of the West. Shaila Abdullah is one of such authors who have exposed the insensitive racial discrimination and the trauma of the migrant Muslims in the USA through *Saffron Dreams* (2009) in the aftermath of the 9/11.

Against this backdrop, the way the boys wounded Arissa verbally is considerable. They committed hate crime in these words: “The veil you wear [...] it is all facade. You try to look pure but you are evil inside. You are not believers, not us” (Abdullah, 2009, p. 62). They blame her to belong to “a race of murders” (Abdullah, 2009, p. 61). This expression of the boys unfolds many things. One, it was racial discrimination; an example of xenophobia. Racism is one of the well-known racial ways to practice necropolitics. Two, it was a reflection of the dominant dichotomy the American government tried to establish. Three, it represented the American people’s treatment to the Muslims and South Asians during the aftermath of 9/11.

Such bully and harassment at the level of citizens was a racial violence. Regarding the exercise of necropower, Mbembe (2019) maintains that “vast majority of armies are composed of citizen soldiers, child soldiers, mercenaries, and privateers” (p. 85). The teen-age boys who attacked Arissa functioned as ‘citizen soldiers’ carrying out the ideology of the US government, although they may not have been instructed or paid to do so. Their ‘politics of race is politics of death’ (Arendt, 1970, as cited in Mbembe, 2019, p. 71).

Mbembe (2019) says that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die” (p. 66). This “control over mortality” (p. 66) was shown by the US government on the citizens of some Muslim countries like Afghanistan and Iraq where they attacked. For Americans war is a “way of exercising right to kill” (Mbembe, 2019, p. 66). Taking reference of the concentration camps, he describes the condition of people under extreme control “divested of political status and reduced to bare life” (Mbembe, 2019, p. 66). Of course, lives of concentration camps and American Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11 were not identical, but some common tenets can be seen. The following quote, one again, is an evidence that the Muslims in America were deprived of many political rights:

Those who did travel preferred to remain quiet during their journey and chose not to converse in their native language even among family members. A few

close friends changed their names— *Salim* became *Sam*, *Ali* converted to *Alan* – in an attempt to hide identities. When asked their nationality, they offered evasive answers. We were homesick individuals in an adopted homeland. We couldn't break free from our origin, and yet we wanted to soar. The tension in our hearts left us suspended in the mid-air" (Abdullah, 2009, p.60).

It shows the apprehensive status of the Muslims: not free to speak their mother tongue, forced to change their names, compelled to hide identities, feeling suffocated, and having hearts full of tension. This condition led them to be 'homesick'. Their condition was no better than the slaves of colonial times, who experienced triple loss: loss of a "home", loss of rights over one's body, and loss of political status (Mbembe, 2019, p. 74). For Mbembe slave life is "a form of death-in-life" or "social death" (pp. 74-75). The quotation above and events in the novel show Muslim migrants' life in the post-9/11 times not different politically from slaves. In the words of Mbembe (2019), their political and democratic rights were suspended. Although there were laws in America after 9/11, they were not effective for South Asian migrants, especially Muslims. America became what Azeem (2016) has cited and endorsed from Agamben above, a 'zone of indistinction', i.e., 'a space where law and lawlessness coexist, blur their boundaries and become indistinguishable from each other'.

Role of media is also in the same line to reiterate the violence. A reporter from *The Observer* asks her "Mrs Illahi, being a Muslim, how does it feel to be attacked by your own people" (Abdullah, 2009, p. 123)? This question sounds rather insensitive, rubbing salt into the wound. Media repeated the rhetoric created by the leaders, which contributed in exacerbating the hatred against Muslims.

Opportunities like better job, education and commerce have made migration increase day per day. When Faizan talked about returning to Pakistan after certain time, Arissa resists and tells him that their children will "have a better future in this country, especially if the child turns out to be a girl" (Abdullah, 2009, p. 113). She wants to assimilate with the American culture. But the Americans 'otherize' her.

The late-modern period is called the age of migration. Mbembe throws light on life in this period thus: "To live under late modern occupation is to experience a permanent condition of being in pain" (Mbembe, 2019, p. 91). Faizan and Arissa had migrated to the US for better opportunities. But what they got in return was pain and tragedy. Mbembe sees late modern occupation "combining of the disciplinary, the biopolitical and the necropolitical" (p. 80). Arissa and her baby had lost control over their body.

Another indication to show 'social death' is in the statement of Arissa when she says, "I too had witnessed all sorts of looks in the past few days, the gazes from

familiar friends who had turned unfamiliar, the silent blank stares of strangers, the angry, wounded looks wanting to hurt; the accusatory sidelong glances screaming silently, you did it, your people brought the towers down” (Abdullah, 2009, p. 60). This excerpt exposes the racial biasness, detachment of friends, blame to the innocent, and, above all, painful existence of a pregnant widow who has lost her husband in the same incident.

It is evident that Arissa was not free to live. Mbembe (2019) has a clear line on this: “[o]ne is free to live one’s life only because one is free to die one’s own death” (p. 90). These both are not possible for Arissa and Faizan. Arissa couldn’t live her life freely; neither could Faizan die his death ‘freely’. Mbembe further elaborates this: “the human subject has to be fully alive at the very moment of dying, to be aware of his own death, to live with impression of actually dying” (Mbembe, 2019, p. 91). Faizan was not aware of his death; Arissa was not living with the impression of actually dying. Death of Faizan was caused by the Twin Tower attacks, which, as reported by the Western media, was caused by Osama Bin Laden and his militants, who were her ‘own people’, as the White teenagers blamed. It justifies that neither the Muslim migrants were free to live, nor were they free to die. Networks of power determined how one should live, or die. In the light of Mbembe’s opinion, Arissa and Faizan were not ‘sovereign’: “To be sovereign is to exert one’s control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power” (p. 66). The couple of Arissa and Faizan, the central characters in the novel, didn’t have any control over mortality and any manifestation of power.

Mbembe defines politics “as the work of death” (Mbembe, 2019, p. 70). Power mongers in the world have been playing such ‘game of politics’, i.e. of death, of the innocent, generally. Various wars are the evidence for this. Mbembe defines war as a “pharmakon”, both remedy and poison at a time (p. 3). America is creating a lot of deaths, “creating death worlds”, that is “new and unique form of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead” (p. 92). In the American lands, as Azeem (2016) contends, Muslim migrants like Arissa Illahi lived life of *Homo Sacer*, ‘a life that may be killed by anyone--an object of violence that exceeds the sphere both of law and of sacrifice’, which is an irony for American democracy (p. 75).

While terror, pain and death surrounded, Arissa was depressed. But she” [did] n’t break down” (Abdullah, 2009, p. 55). As time came, she gave birth to Raian, Faizan’s son who was physically and mentally abnormal. She focused her attention to rear this boy, and regained her energy to live: she decided to face the world as a single mother and take care of her special child” (Abdullah, 2009, p. 55). She found another souvenir from Faizan that was his half-written book *Soul Searcher*. Now

Arisa made one more determination to complete it. Another activity to heal her trauma was painting. Arissa restarted painting and tried to come out of the despair. Also, she took responsibility of an editor of a paper called *Chamak*. She confesses that “the work helped alleviate some of my anxiety over the future” (p. 124). These four things are related to creativity which saved her life, secluded her from the racists and ‘defied the death’ frequently imposed on her. Her retreat from the outer world and more engagement with creative works can be counted as covert resistance. In covert resistance, “acts that are intentional yet go unnoticed” by the oppressors are counted (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004, p. 545). Arissa’s creative activities are not in the notice of the White Americans and broader society. Of course, when the book got released, and her baby grew up as boy, also, her painting was demonstrated; they all must have appeared on surface. Such “[a]cts of withdrawal, whether avoidance of a particular individual or self-imposed exile from a particular context” are also acts of covert resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004, p. 545).

Asraf (2015) comments on the evolution of Arissa thus: “Illahi’s shift from pessimism to optimism is gradual but continuous” (p. 107). It is possible when she recognizes her potential and resists the threats on her. Asraf further says that “it is her very own self that brings her out of the state of destitute” (p. 121). Her constant evolution is reflected in her achievements.

This all shows that the USA after 9/11 was not a convenient place to live for the Muslim migrants, especially from South Asia. Fear of death and torture was hovering over them. Their social and professional life was in risk. They, like Arissa, had to hide to save their life.

Conclusion

The incident of 9/11 increased transaction of terror and death suddenly. Innocent Muslims like Arissa and Faizan had been victimized by ‘war games’. American government and mainstream American media had brainwashed the common Americans that the Muslims were terrorist. This forceful Western narrative had both physical and psychological impacts on migrant Muslims in the US. Physically, Muslims like Arissa were beaten, ostracized and killed, and mentally they were tortured. It was made difficult for their free movement and sovereign life. Politics of death victimized Arissa and millions of other Muslims. In such an adverse situation, Arissa tried to retaliate on the aggressors in response to the physical abuses to the best level of her capabilities. Then she seems to have adopted survival strategies. Temporarily, she stayed shrunk in her private world. Then she created her own world of creativity and positivity through art and literature. To stay alive with such engagements of hope was a resilience and resistance against the destructive and revengeful Western narrative.

As Mbembe has said politics is a death work. Arissa ignores the physical world of death work and creates her own fictive world of ‘death work’ in her paintings, which is not destructive, rather it is constructive. She uses her power of art, heals her pain, and rears the boy who was nearly killed by the teen age boys. While America was fragmenting the world, she was making it whole: making incomplete book complete, impaired boy healthy, fragmented life complete. She challenged the ‘social death’ imposed on her by the Americans. She exercised her ‘sovereignty’ in her paintings and her book. It can be a piece of beautiful message to common readers that during their lows, they can take help of art and literature to revitalize their energy. Literature nourishes life, whereas politics may hinder.

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