



Tracing Death as a Political Instrument: A Study of Osama Alomar's Selected Collections of Flash Fiction

Hamas Shahid¹

ABSTRACT

Article History:

Received:

October 2, 2023

Accepted:

December 26, 2023

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

This research article analyzes two collections of flash fiction including *Fullblood Arabian* (2014) and *The Teeth of the Comb and Other Stories* (2017) written by Osama Alomar, a Syrian refugee author. Guided by the theoretical framework of necropolitics as proposed by Achille Mbembe, this article investigates the constant presence of death and its multifaceted role in the wake of the Syrian civil war as portrayed in Alomar's selected collections of flash fiction. The article attempts to study how death becomes an instrument in the civil war, widely used, manipulated, and exploited by various actors during the conflict-ridden period, each employing it differently. Although the selected collections of flash fiction demonstrate that death takes on many forms and performs multiple functions in the backdrop of the Syrian civil war, this research article narrows its scope to the analysis of how death is used as a political pawn and a political statement. At the outset of this research, it is postulated that the ruling Syrian regime transforms death and its fear into an instrument to intimidate and subdue Syrian civilian characters, thereby downplaying death as merely a political pawn. On the contrary, death also emerges as a political statement of the Syrian civilian characters as they begin to embrace death as a form of political activism to bring about social and political change in Syria. Invoking Catherine Belsey's textual analysis method, some flash fiction stories from the selected collections are analyzed to study how the ruling Syrian regime and civilian characters reconfigure death in the wake of the Syrian civil war.

Keywords: death, political pawn, political statement, Syrian civil war

¹ English Instructor at the Virtual University, Islamabad, Pakistan



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License \(CC BY-NC 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

As shadows of chaos and despair engulf Syria in the midst of the civil war, a young author, Osama Alomar, witnesses the ever-increasing human suffering. Determined to break free from the unforgiving heart of the war-torn Syria, Alomar becomes one of the millions of Syrian refugees. Not yielding to the continuous challenges of the life of a refugee in the American asylum, Alomar emerges from the depth of adversity as a potent literary voice and weaves tales of death, devastation, and destruction in the civil war-ravaged Syria. Armed with mighty words and profound rhetoric, Alomar seeks to give readers an insight into the brutalities of the tyrannical Syrian regime. By representing the suffering of Syrian civilians to a global audience, Alomar attempts to elicit empathy and recognition for their pain from a global audience.

Experimenting with the traditional Middle Eastern genre of “qissa qasira” (widely known as very short stories), Alomar publishes two popular collections of very short stories, including *Fullblood Arabian* (2014) and *The Teeth of the Comb and Other Stories* (2017) (Rao, 2017). These collections have been originally written in Arabic language and subsequently translated into English by C. J. Collins. The present article employs the translated versions of both collections. These collections, categorized as flash fiction, bear witness to the politics of death plaguing the lives of civilians caught in the Syrian civil war. These collections show death and life dancing together in everyday life in Syria. In the selected flash fiction narratives, Alomar blurs the line between mundane and macabre for the civilian characters caught in the continuous cycle of violence and suffering. This literary approach helps Alomar portray how the Syrian civil war twists the meaning and function of death in the everyday life of civilian characters.

In the selected collections, Alomar’s choice of words is as vivid as artistic. “The nation’s severed limbs were mixed up with the severed limbs and heads of its humans”, writes Alomar to describe the state of Syria (Alomar, 2017, p. 23). A myriad of references to “pain and tears”, “suffering from hunger and cold and fear”, “severed human limbs piled up” and “killing, destruction, desolation” serve as a mirror to reality in civil war-ravaging Syria (Alomar, 2017, pp. 42, 53, 97). As these images evoke the emotions of empathy and horror in readers, the narrative itself stands as a witness to the wide-scale death that civilian characters are condemned to. Besides this, human suffering and the spirit of resilience exhibited by the Syrian civilians are also highlighted through Alomar’s linguistic choice in the selected collections. Without directly using the term ‘death’, the flash fiction stories paint a picture of the world where violent death is a routine matter as well as the fate of millions, with no discrimination for any age, group, or sex.

In light of these observations, this research article aims to investigate how Alomar’s selected collections of flash fiction reconfigure death as a political instrument. It seeks to establish how death as a constant presence in the selected collections takes on a multifaceted role and thereby serves as a political pawn as well as a political statement. Analyzing death as a political pawn requires the understanding of how death can be exploited in the political arena by individuals or groups enjoying political power. On the other hand, death as a political

statement involves the analysis of individual or collective acts of civilians embracing death as a form of political activism or protest against the oppressive regime. The main argument of the article focuses on how the autocratic Syrian regime in the selected collections appears to use death as a political pawn, while the Syrian civilians seem to accept or voluntarily embrace mortality to show their willingness to prioritize political change over their lives and personal interests.

The reason why it is important to analyze the multifaceted role of death in the study of the selected collections of flash fiction is that death constantly manifests itself as the most dominant and commonly prevailing factor throughout the conflict-ridden times in the wake of the Syrian civil war. In these collections, it is the omnipresence of death that alters the course of Syrian history, thereby transforming the political landscape and disrupting the lives of millions of Syrian civilians. Likewise, it is crucial to note that the selected collections portray death as not only the result of pervasive violence in the wake of the Syrian civil war but also a driving agent of the suffering, grievances, divisions, and retribution in the country. Therefore, this research seeks to investigate the multifaceted role of death, especially as a political pawn and a political statement.

The reading of these flash fiction collections opens the eyes of readers to the disturbing reality of the omnipresent death in Syria. Since the present paper seeks to investigate how death is politicized, or in other words, turned into a political instrument within Syria, it is appropriate to invoke the theoretical lens of necropolitics. Theorized by Achille Mbembe, necropolitics refers to the ruling system in which the ruling party enjoys total control over the “mortality” of the masses (Mbembe, 2003, p. 12). This type of governing system creates an impermeable power gap in society. Under such regimes, the life and death of the state subjects are heavily dependent on the whims of the ruling elites (Mbembe, 2003, pp. 11-12). As a result, everyday life in society appears to be a power play of the ruling regime. Since the ruling regime gets to decide who lives and who dies, the mortality of the state subjects becomes a pawn in the hands of the political elites who control, manipulate, and discard it to establish their hegemony and create an atmosphere of fear and helplessness for the masses (Mbembe, 2003, pp. 11-12). In such a system of government, the state subjects are considered “disposable”, while the ruling regime establishes itself as a “necropower” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 27). These insights into the necropolitical regimes are informed by the works of Achille Mbembe addressing necropolitics, and they help to address the suffering of Syrian civilians in Osama Alomar’s selected collections.

Moreover, it appears that the narrative voice of Alomar’s *Fullblood Arabian* (2014) and *The Teeth of the Comb and Other Stories* (2017) explores the possibilities for new perspectives and novel depictions of death, devastation, and violence carried out in the wake of the Syrian civil war. These collections offer readers a peek into war-torn Syria where the state-sponsored violence casts dark shadows over the lives of civilian characters whose stories are infused with resistance, struggle, and occasional survival. The unsettling question that shapes the rhetoric of these collections asks how the politics of death marks the beginning of a new chapter in the lives of Syrian civilians. This is addressed

through the textual analysis method proposed by Catherine Belsey which suggests a close investigation of the primary texts to interpret literary works (Griffin, 2005, 12). The following passages in this research paper show how death is instrumentalized in the wake of the Syrian civil war.

Death as a political pawn

The selected collections of flash fiction show death being used as a political pawn by necropowers. The necropolitical Syrian regime attempts to “attribute rational objectives to the very act of killing” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 23). The ruling elites assume “the right to. . . the taking of life” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 23). Mbembe also notes that the necropolitical regimes are notorious for engaging in “the generalized instrumentalization of human existence” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 14). The state subjects or civilian population is reduced to mere tools to strengthen the rule of the regime, exercise its control, and further its interests. Such a ruling approach allows necropolitical regimes to manipulate and discard human life to maintain their power, use fear, intimidation, and coercion to control the target population and suppress resistance. This is also an important theme of Alomar’s collections of flash fiction.

In Osama Alomar’s *Fullblood Arabian* (2014), a flash fiction story entitled “The Smiling People” paints a world in which the life of civilians is reduced to objects at the disposal of an autocratic ruler. In this story, a tyrant leader creates a “secret police” force that is tasked with the duty of making sure that the public reveres the autocratic ruler (Alomar, 2014, p. 37). Unhappy and dissatisfied civilians are imprisoned, tortured, and executed. The story opens with a man named Wadi who is severely beaten by personnel of the secret police for viewing the photograph of the ruler with an “unsmiling face” (Alomar, 2014, p. 37). Wadi is imprisoned and continuously assaulted with “punches and kicks” (Alomar, 2014, p. 37). Following the trial, he is found guilty and sentenced to “smile at the leader’s image for a life” (Alomar, 2014, p. 37). This story shows the overwhelming coercion and excessive violence that characterizes the life of civilians in the backdrop of the Syrian civil war. The civilians are devalued and dehumanized to satisfy the whims of a tyrant leader.

This story highlights the instrumentalization of civilians’ lives by an autocratic regime. Civilians are allowed to exist only to ensure that the regime has human subjects to rule upon and dominate. The lives of state subjects are considered nothing more than political pawns at the disposal of the regime. The story also foregrounds the intolerance of the regime towards even the slightest form of dissent. The regime is carrying out such harsh punishment as a warning to people who are inclined to be vocal about their discontentment with the ruling regime. Harsh consequences like imprisonment, torture, and execution reduce the possibilities of serious dissent and non-compliance from the rest of the civilian population with the ruling regime. As a result, civilians may remain submissive to the regime and compliant with its policies.

One of the most important things to analyze here is how the state resorts to manipulation to create a façade of prosperity in the country. Every smiling glance at the leader's photo gives a false sense of unwavering public support for the autocratic ruler. This policy of the ruler helps him maintain his power and popularity among the masses which, in turn, fosters illusionary legitimacy for the autocratic rule of the existing regime. As a result, his power is consolidated, and he can pursue his vested interests without any worries or fear of dissent. The contradiction between the tyrant leader's pursuit of a prosperous state and his ruthless methods to achieve it brings about an ironic twist in the story. His delusion that forced smiles can lead to a prosperous state unfolds absurdity in the story.

Another crucial point to note here is that the story aims to show how the necropolitical regime uses security forces to oppress civilians. Prima facie, security forces are designed to protect the fundamental rights of state subjects, however, the necropolitical regime shown in this story uses security forces to intimidate civilians, violate their rights and take their lives. This helps the necropower to falsely represent civilians as "enemies of the state" who are therefore dealt with by legitimately established armed forces (Mbembe, 2003, p. 19). This is an important subject of discussion in the study of societies that are governed by autocratic regimes.

This issue is further explored by a research paper "Civil–Military Relations and Civil War Recurrence: Security Forces in Postwar Politics" (Berg, 2020). This research paper argues that ruling regimes' act of "politicizing" security forces in the context of civil wars has many repercussions for states, ranging from short-term to long-term implications (Berg, 2020, p. 21). The government policy of "allowing the military sufficient autonomy to use force unconstrained" against civilians reduces peace prospects significantly (Berg, 2020, p. 21). Therefore, it can be argued that fostering a "restructured" role of military institutions hinders the normalization of civil-military relations in the civil war period (Berg, 2020, p. 22). Although using military force against civilians may appear as a favorable approach to ruling regimes during the civil war period to "neutralize threats to their authority", it may result in a monopoly of power and violence at the hands of security forces afterward. This, in turn, weakens regimes' sovereignty (Berg, 2020, p. 21). Therefore, we can argue that "The Smiling People" is a story that draws attention to the repercussions of controlling civilians through security forces.

The story "Free Elections" shows how oppressive regimes instill the fear of death in the minds of civilians to subjugate them under the cover of fake democracy. The fear of death or violence forces them to comply with the inhuman policies of the regime. The story opens with a paradoxical statement: "Slaves reelected their executioner" (Alomar, 2017, p. 31). The use of the word "slaves" for civilians indicates that they are not free to choose their leader. It shows that the electoral process is a mere façade of the regime to legitimize and consolidate its rule. Civilians seem to be coerced by the government to re-elect a ruler. The term "executioner" for the ruler implies that the ruler is oppressive and ruthless. This is an interesting twist in the story because it shows that the fear of death or

imminent violence forces civilians to re-elect their tyrant ruler, thereby making them complicit in their oppression.

This story also shows that a necropolitical ruler is no different from an executioner. Under such regimes, a wide number of civilians are executed to create a fearful climate and ensure absolute control of the regime over a populace. The rest of the civilians are allowed to survive only to ensure that the regime has human subjects to govern. Therefore, it can be argued that the wide-scale elimination of civilians' lives is a common feature of a necropolitical regime, while the preservation of the lives of some civilians is a strategic imperative.

In this story, the narrator claims that the election raises serious questions about "democracy and human dignity" which indicates the irony inherent in the politically maneuvered elections (Alomar, 2017, p. 31). Moreover, as civilians do not have the freedom to choose their representatives, they give in to the coercion and manipulation of the existing regime which, in turn, compromises their "human dignity" (Alomar, 2017, p. 31). Their powerlessness before the oppressive regime robs them of their basic human dignity and freedom. The story uses the literary device of irony to foreground the perversion of democratic ideals. However, the absurdity inherent in elections arranged by oppressive autocratic regimes is reinforced by the distortion of the democratic system that aims to foster freedom and self-determination. Ultimately, this story highlights that wide-scale executions and elimination of civilians are common occurrences in a necropolitical regime.

In Alomar's *Fullblood Arabian* (2014), a story entitled "When Tongues Were Cut Off" portrays a necro power killing civilians to perpetuate its rule. In this story, resistance from the civilian population to the oppressive regime enrages a "dictator" (Alomar, 2014, p. 24). After deliberate contemplation, the dictator decides to give his subjects a taste of democracy. He announces that from now onwards, it will be his subjects who will enjoy special privilege and walk down red carpets, instead of him. However, by doing so, the cunning dictator aims to punish the masses for their dissatisfaction with the prevalent form of government. He gives the order to cut off the "tongues" of his subjects to be used as the fabric for the red carpet (Alomar, 2014, p. 24). After civilians' tongues are amputated, they assume long-lasting silence which is interpreted by the dictator as their expression of ultimate happiness with him and his rule. The amputation of civilians to render them voiceless shows the functioning of a necropolitical regime.

The story highlights that violence, dismemberment, and death are used as political pawns by necropolitical regimes to subdue dissent and resistance. The story presents an ironic situation where a red carpet acting as a symbol of grandeur intended to show the humility of the dictator and the sublimity of his subjects turns into a grotesque and macabre spectacle. The dictator's humble gesture juxtaposed with his cruelty exposes the absurdity lying underneath any attempts to improve the lives of state subjects ruled by tyrannical autocracies.

Concerning death and violence used as political pawns, it is imperative to refer to a book entitled *Environmental Ethics: Life Narratives from Kashmir & Palestine* (2023) that also discusses repressive states that use violence as a political pawn to subjugate and victimize target populations. This book invokes the concept of Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), as proposed by Louis Althusser, to indicate the use of force and coercion by repressive states to maintain control. In the context of Kashmir, “the death toll of over 70,000”, as highlighted in the book, serves as a “grim reminder” of the oppression faced by Kashmiri people on a regular basis (Aamir, 2023, p. 210). Moreover, the book foregrounds the deliberate “non-acknowledgment” of this death toll as a strategic move to manipulate perceptions and cast blame on the victims (Aamir, 2023, p. 210). The use of violence, killings, and deaths becomes a tool at the hands of the occupier Indian State to suppress dissent and control the narrative of the Kashmiri populace. This discussion can be extended to the present research to establish the Syrian regime, as portrayed in Osama Alomar’s collections, as a repressive state and the killings and imprisonment of Syrian civilians as part of the ruling Syrian regime’s Repressive State Apparatus.

This theme gets extended in *Fullblood Arabian*, Alomar writes a story entitled “Historic Missile” which depicts the way the Syrian regime condemns a massive number of civilians to death. This story also engages with a sensitive issue i.e., the use of nuclear weapons in armed conflicts. Since the Syrian civil war is notorious for using such harmful weapons and nuclear attacks on Syrian civilians, this story provides readers with an insight into the state of fear and panic caused by it. The rationale of the necropolitical Syrian regime behind launching these nuclear attacks against civilians is also addressed by Alomar in the selected narratives.

In this story, a mysterious “explosion” takes place in the heart of a city. Unfortunately, this explosion results in “terrible loss of life and property” of civilians. This creates a climate of fear and “terror” amongst all citizens as they look for “basements” and “shelters” to hide from potential danger and further attacks (Alomar, 2014, p. 13). For civilians portrayed in this story, life can never return to a normal state since the nation fails to ward off danger. To make things worse, civilians are told to remain in hiding forever.

This story shows that, under necropolitical regimes, civilian life is as precarious as an object placed on the edge of a cliff. The ruling regimes have access to lethal explosives that are used against civilians with impunity. In such circumstances, death is a constant presence. In this story, the regime seems to display its capability to inflict wide-scale death on civilians through war tanks and nuclear explosives only as a show of power. The civilians running around in a state of fear and panic in the story do not seem to be engaged in any protest, but they are still threatened with a loss of life by the regime. Only the regime’s public display of explosives is enough to scare off civilians, condemning them to a life in hiding and slow death, as portrayed in this story.

In short, this story shows how civilian life is always facing death threats under a necropolitical regime in conflict-ridden periods. If a necropolitical regime

perceives any threat to its political power or dominance at the hands of the populace, its first resort is to condemn a massive number of civilians to death. This shows how death is used as a political pawn by the Syrian regime.

It is now time to investigate how death functions as a political statement in the selected collections.

Death as a political statement

If a group of people decide to accept or embrace death to achieve a political goal or to make a political point, it means that they are using death as their political statement. Alomar's selected collections show death being used as a political statement in two ways. Some civilian characters seem to use the 'fear of death' as a source of strength and solidarity in the face of overwhelming violence. This is the civilians' strategy to counter the damage inflicted on their community. Secondly, some civilian characters collectively embrace death as a form of resistance and to achieve a political goal i.e., challenge the ruling regime's sovereignty over their mortality. The following section of the paper analyzes these two forms of political statements made by civilian characters that are directly linked with death.

For a number of Syrian civilian characters represented in the selected collections of flash fiction, fear of death seems to function as a unifying force. The constant fear of death brings civilian characters closer to each other. Therefore, it can be argued that the unpredictability of life in the face of overwhelming state-administered violence in the backdrop of the Syrian civil war acts as a unifying force for a number of civilian characters. Considering these arguments, some stories from Alomar's selected collections of flash fiction are analyzed.

In *Teeth of the Comb and Other Stories*, the flash fiction story entitled "The Head of Hair and the Guillotine" portrays how violence and death bring Syrian civilian characters on one page. In this story, the image of the guillotine represents the brutality of the State. It can be construed as an oppressive state apparatus which is used to subdue civilians. The importance of the image of the guillotine is reinforced by Achille Mbembe in his discussions on necropolitics. Mbembe notes that "guillotine marks a new phase in . . . disposing of the enemies of the state" because it has the capacity to kill target individuals in "a relatively short span of time" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 19). This shows how innovations in the modern world allow governments to carry out executions efficiently.

The story begins with the portrayal of a man who is about to be executed by guillotine. Before carrying out the execution, the executioners begin to cut the man's long hair. The act of cutting hair symbolizes the degradation and dehumanization of civilians who are condemned to death during the civil war. As the executioners cut the man's hair, the hair strands get into a verbal exchange. It becomes clear from the conversation taking place among them that hair strands are a metaphor for Syrian civilians. Considering themselves "weak creatures", hair strands grapple with the question of why they are being mercilessly abused,

controlled, and manipulated at the hands of state-employed executioners (Alomar, 2017, p. 19). One hair strand complains that the necropolitical Syrian state viciously tries to “bend us and wrap us and move us and tie us up” (Alomar, 2017, p. 19). This quote highlights the excessive vulnerability of civilians and the overwhelming brutality of the state.

The central theme of the story emerges from the conclusive remarks of this exchange where a wise hair strand contends, “Despite all this weakness . . . in union there is strength” (Alomar, 2017, p. 19). This indicates that, in the midst of the Syrian civil war, the shared vulnerability of civilians in the face of indiscriminatory violence helps them seek strength in unity. As civilians face death together, they find death as the common ground for them to stand in solidarity with each other. Therefore, the shared fear of impending death is the common danger that civilians contend with in their everyday lives.

Different communities also come together with the rise of necropolitics in Syria. In light of some of Alomar’s flash fiction stories in the selected collections, it can be argued that the fear of death joins different communities, sects, and religious groups. Death becomes the bigger and common enemy which helps civilians move past their past conflicts and ideological clashes. This makes room for national harmony and mutual support for the oppressed Syrian civilians. This argument needs to be especially emphasized since it can be interpreted as a manifestation of growing harmony and solidarity in the Syrian society facing necropolitical violence. Since Achille Mbembe argues that a necropolitical regime condemns the target population to “alienation” and “social death”, stories like “The Head of Hair and the Guillotine” and “A Dream” show a counter-narrative of the Syrian civil war where Syrian civilians seem receptive to unity and solidarity (Mbembe, 2003, p. 21). This argument is also supplemented by the analysis of a flash fiction story given below.

A story entitled “A Dream” demonstrates how the rising level of violence and death in the wake of the Syrian civil war brings together different Syrian communities. The story portrays a man who has a “hard” day which can be interpreted as a symbol of the dark and hard times in Syrian history i.e., civil war (Alomar, 2017, p. 41). As the man goes to bed, he has a life-changing dream. In this dream, he sees a handsome man breaking away from the “barriers of religion, sect, and race” (Alomar, 2017, p. 41). These barriers are given the physical shape which helps to make the theme of the story more palpable. This man collects all these barriers and carries them with him to discard them altogether in a “pit” (Alomar, 2017, p. 41). For him, this is the only way to seek “truth” (Alomar, 2017, p. 41). The message that this story brings home is, that dark periods in the history of nations can also be harbingers of much-awaited peace and harmony. This type of outlook towards turbulent times promotes resilience and optimism among victims of violent conflicts. They are able to see and identify that the real enemy of their nation is not a sectarian or religious divide but a necropolitical regime that quashes all opposing factions and divergent viewpoints. The fear of death common to all these communities helps them appreciate the blessing of solidarity and peace.

In relation to this discussion, a relevant research paper entitled “Sectarian Framing in the Syrian Civil War” (Corstange & York 2018) can expand the analysis of the above flash fiction story. This paper notes that war analysts may often cite sectarianism as one of the main causes of the Syrian civil war. However, it is not as simple as it is “described” or “summarized” in circulating narratives (Corstange & York, 2018, pp. 1-2). The researchers argue that “propaganda efforts” are carried out by the “pro-government” sections of the Syrian society to frame the Syrian civil war into a sectarian conflict to fit it into the broader Shia-Sunni conflict deeply rooted in the political landscape of the Middle East (Corstange & York, 2018, pp. 3-4). This helps the regime legitimize its violent actions carried out under the pretext of countering religious intolerance and sectarian conflict. Moreover, the sectarian frame of the civil war only resonates with individuals whose sectarian ideology is “consistent” with the “regime propaganda” (Corstange & York, 2018, p. 2). Therefore, it can be argued that Alomar’s narratives such as “The Head of Hair and the Guillotine” and “A Dream” attempt to show how unity, coexistence, and tolerance in Syrian society are the prerequisites of long-awaited peace and stability.

Additionally, the selected collections portray that, as the chaos and instability take hold of the country in the midst of the Syrian civil war, death through suicide emerges as a form of resistance against the necropolitical regime. It helps civilian characters challenge the overarching control of the tyrannical regime over their life and death. Suicide appears to be a potent refusal of the civilian characters to accept subjugation and violation of their fundamental rights as well as dignity at the hands of the necropolitical regime. It is an overt form of defiance to the regime that allows individuals to reclaim their right over their mortality. Moreover, the suicide attempts of civilian characters help them counter the autocratic regime’s all-powerful image. Since the Syrian regime attempts to establish itself as a powerful government that exercises absolute control over civilians’ mortality, the suicides of the civilians emerge as a form of resistance to the growing control of the regime over their mortality. It is a unique, albeit twisted approach through which civilians defeat the regime’s agenda to subdue and subjugate civilians to its power.

Suicide or self-sacrifice in the pursuit of political change and freedom is an important theme of the selected collections. It is also discussed by Achille Mbembe in his work on necropolitics. He observes: “To a large extent, resistance and self-destruction are synonymous” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 36). For Mbembe, using death as a political statement requires “the will to die” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 37). It is the voluntary sacrifice of one’s life to convey a message of resistance and resilience in the face of prevailing injustices. Mbembe compares the concept of self-sacrifice with the popular construct of “martyrdom” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 37). The similarity between the two concepts is the common goal i.e., the dedication to a broader social or political cause. However, it is important to recognize the difference between the two concepts to be able to build a case for a few civilian characters

portrayed in the selected collections who resist the oppressive Syrian regime with their lives.

Therefore, it is imperative to clarify the difference between self-sacrifice and martyrdom in the present research paper. In general discourse, the difference between the two lies in the question of how mortality is inflicted. If one is killed at the hands of the enemy, he/she has attained martyrdom. On the contrary, if one sacrifices themselves through individual or collective suicide to mobilize political protest and challenge the pervasive power structure, it can be labeled as a political statement.

Mbembe further argues that self-sacrifice leads to “a moment of supremacy in which the subject overcomes his own mortality” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 37). This shows that Mbembe considers mortality a form of vulnerability of the target population which is exploited by a necropolitical regime to ensure the continuation of its rule. However, if the target population defeats the fear of death, it helps to weaken the control of the necropolitical regime over its subjects. Since the regime controls target subjects’ mortality, reclaiming rights over their mortality might appear a good opportunity for subjects to eliminate the cycle of oppression. Therefore, the selected collections of flash fiction highlight Syrian civilian characters’ attempts to reclaim their mortality.

In *Fullblood Arabian*, a flash fiction story entitled “Whales’ Suicide” centralizes the theme of choosing death as a form of resistance. The story portrays a group of personified whales who decide to commit suicide as a “protest” against humans polluting the ocean (Alomar, 2014, p. 42). They regard “armed conflicts” among humans as the biggest source of the harmful wastage that is dumped into the ocean (Alomar, 2014, p. 42). They claim that humans have “poisoned” their “clean and pure” habitat (Alomar, 2014, p. 42). This story is an allegorical representation of how the Syrian civil war has destroyed the Syrian land and atmosphere. The regime’s unchecked use of nuclear and chemical weapons to scare and subdue civilians has poisoned the Syrian homeland for millions of Syrian civilians, who, either choose to commit suicide like the group of whales in this allegorical story or flee from Syria in pursuit of asylum.

In addition, some Syrian civilian characters in the selected collections seem to embrace death not only as a form of resistance but also as a source of liberation from the violence erupting from the Syrian civil war. To the civilian characters caught up in the relentless suffering and violence, death appears as a merciful escape. It marks an end to their suffering and the horrors of the civil war. In short, death is a form of escape from and protest against the tyrannical regime or “the murderous state” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 17). It provides civilians with an opportunity to break free from a life that is subjected to the whims of the ruling regime. These arguments can also be supported by the analysis of the following flash fiction story.

In the story “Mutiny”, clocks all across the world decide to overturn the “hegemony” and “tyranny” of the all-powerful “time” (Alomar, 2017, p. 59). Although they anticipate dire consequences for their actions, they manage to let

go of their fear and struggle for freedom. They regard it as a sacred revolution that will liberate them from never-ending submission to time. As they go about their revolt, people across the globe begin to dispose off their clocks. However, it does not deter the clocks. As things move forward, more and more clocks keep joining the effort to defeat the unchecked authority of “time” (Alomar, 2017, p. 59). As a result, clocks’ pursuit of freedom is countered by people’s willingness to discard the malfunctioning clocks. This situation results in a “clock graveyard” which can be construed as an end to the era of time-keeping devices (Alomar, 2017, p. 59). However, clocks embrace this ruthless extermination in the name of sacrifice and struggle for freedom. Although they were aware of their eventual annihilation for revolting against the unchecked power of time, their persistent efforts elevated their fighting spirit and dignity.

This story can also be interpreted along different lines. The image of people across the world discarding their clocks seems to imply how the international actors are also embroiled in the continuation of violence and chaos in Syria. This leads us to consider the Syrian civil war itself a political pawn in the hands of bigger powers. This point can be substantiated by a research paper entitled “Tangled Web: The Syrian Civil War and Its Implications” (Carpenter 2013). This paper argues that it is irrefutable that the Syrian regime is responsible for the wide-scale death and violence on the Syrian landscape in the wake of the civil war. Besides this, there are also other factors responsible for the unending unrest and instability in the country. One of the crucial factors to note is that the Syrian civil war is a manifestation of “geopolitical” and “regional rivalries” (Carpenter, 2013, p. 4). Contending superpowers and Middle Eastern politics view the Syrian landscape as a battleground for their own “feuds” and interests (Carpenter, 2013, pp. 5-6). This is the reason that even the excessive use of force by the Syrian regime has failed to subdue resistance and establish supremacy. This indicates that the Syrian civil war is not simply a conflict between the Syrian populace and the ruling regime. It is a war between a wide number of national and international interest groups. Nevertheless, Carpenter maintains that the fall of the ruling regime led by Bashar Al-Asad will significantly stabilize Syria (2013, p. 7). Therefore, resistance signals favorable peace prospects for Syrian civilians.

However, it is important to note that Syrian civilian characters in the selected collections face limitations in expressing their resistance against the powerful ruling regime. In the wake of the Syrian civil war which witnessed the extensive use of nuclear and chemical weapons against the Syrian populace, civilian characters seem to have limited options to resist the indiscriminate suffering and pain inflicted on them by the autocratic regime. In light of the selected collections, it can be argued that the reason behind this is the disproportionate access of civilians and the Syrian regime to military weapons. The Syrian state seems to own all of the tankers, artillery, and explosives that are used against civilians to subdue protests and resistance to the ruling regime.

Regardless, the selected flash fiction collections show that unarmed civilians resort to innovative ways to protest the regime’s oppression. One of them

is self-sacrifice or collective suicide which helps them to fight the state-administered violence with their own lives. Stories such as “Mutiny” and “Whales’ Suicide” highlight how civilians use their bodies as mighty weapons to exercise their collective political right to resistance and autonomy.

Overall, the analysis of Osama Alomar’s *Fullblood Arabian* (2014) and *The Teeth of the Comb and Other Stories* (2017) shows that death is turned into a political instrument in the wake of the Syrian civil war. The regime as well as the civilian characters politicize death to achieve its vested interests and protect their rights, respectively. The ruling Syrian regime seems to use death as a political pawn to strengthen its power and subdue resistance. This is done through the wide-scale use of chemical weapons, nuclear attacks, and coercion against civilians exerted through state-regulated security forces. Through state-administered violence, protesting civilians are imprisoned, tortured, and executed. On the other hand, Syrian civilian characters from the selected collections respond to the oppression of the regime with the same tool. They attempt to turn death and the fear of death into a political statement. Not only do different religious and sectarian groups unite under the fear of death but they also see death as a form of resistance. Instead of being intimidated or deterred, they embrace death as a form of escape as well as martyrdom. To many civilian characters studied in this article, embracing death means standing up and fighting for their political rights.

References

- Aamir, R. (2023). *Environmental ethics: Life narratives from Kashmir & Palestine*. Vanguard Books.
- Alomar, O. (2014). *Fullblood Arabian*. New Directions.
- Alomar, O. (2017). *The Teeth of the comb & other stories*. New Directions Publishing.
- Berg, L.-A. (2020). Civil–military relations and civil war recurrence: Security forces in postwar politics. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64(7-8), 1307-1334.
- Carpenter, T. G. (2013). Tangled web: The Syrian civil war and its implications. *Mediterranean Quarterly* 24(1), 1-11.
- Corstange, D. a. (2018). Sectarian framing in the Syrian civil war. *American Journal of Political Science* 62(2), 441-455.
- Griffin, G. (2013). *Research methods for English studies*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Mbembé, J.-A. a. (2003). Necropolitics. *Public culture* 15(1), 11-40.

Rao, M. G. (2017, May 8). No Longer Driving a Cab, a Syrian Writer in America Focusses on His Fiction. *The New Yorker*.
<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/no-longer-driving-a-cab-a-syrian-writer-in-america-focusses-on-his-fiction>