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Necropolitical power of War in Kevin Powers's The Yellow Birds

Sara Shakir Gharib(MA)

sar21a2008@uoanbar.edu.iq

Asst. Prof. Yasir Mutlib Abdullah

yasirliterature77@uoanbar.edu.iq

University of Anbar, College of Arts, Dept. of English

السلطة النيكروليتيكية للحرب في رواية كيفن باورز "الطيور الصفراء"

سارة شاكر غريب (ماجستير)

أ.م. ياسر مطلب عبدالله

جامعة الانبار، كلية الآداب، قسم اللغة الانكليزية

Abstract

This study examines the utilization of Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics in Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds*, a significant novel which set against the Iraq War. Through a Mbembean lens, the study looks at how war creates places where people die and controls life and death, focused on how soldiers are affected by the harsh logic of necropolitics. The analysis emphasizes the novel's depiction of the psychological and physical ravages of war, demonstrating how the characters' lives are influenced by state-sanctioned violence and disposability. This study examines issues of trauma, survival, and the dehumanization of war participants, uncovering the intrinsic racial, geopolitical, and existential aspects of necropolitical sovereignty. The study contends that *The Yellow Birds* challenges the necropolitical framework of contemporary conflict while also posing significant inquiries regarding humanity's role in mechanisms of violence and mortality. **Keywords:** War, Sovereignty, Necropolitics, Mbembe, Power, *The Yellow Birds*

المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة توظيف مفهوم: "السياسة الميتة" (Necropolitics) كما قدمه أشيل مبمبي في رواية: "طيور صفراء" لكيفن باورز. وهي رواية مهمة تدور أحداثها حول حرب العراق كما تراها عدسة أشيل مبمبي. كما تسلط الدراسة الضوء على دور الحرب وتداعياتها الخطيرة في صناعة الموت، مع التركيز على تأثير المنطق القاسي للسياسة الميتة على الجنود، من خلال وصفها للآثار النفسية والجسدية المدمرة التي تخلفها الحرب، وكيف أن الشخصيات تتأثر بالعنف المبرر من قبل الدولة، وبمفهوم الاستغناء عن الحياة البشرية. تستكشف الدراسة أيضًا قضايا: (الصدمة، البقاء، وتجريد المشاركين في الحرب من إنسانيتهم) لتكشف عن الجوانب العرقية والجيوسياسية والوجودية الكامنة في سيادة السياسة الميتة، يذكر أن رواية "طيور صفراء" تتحدى إطار السياسة الميتة في الصراعات المعاصرة، وتطرح في الوقت ذاته تساؤلات مهمة حول دور الإنسان في صناعة آليات العنف والموت.

Introduction

As Achille Mbembe put it, the idea of necropolitics is a powerful way to look at how authority, war, and the power over life and death are connected. In Kevin Powers's moving 2012 book *The Yellow Birds*, which is set during the Iraq War, necropolitics becomes an important way to think about how violence, death, and choice work in modern war zones. Powers' study of how war affects soldiers mentally and physically is similar to Mbembe's claim that sovereignty is not just the power to give life, but also the power to decide how people die. This study paper uses Mbembe's theory of necropolitics to look at *The Yellow Birds*. This novel talks about John

Bartle, a 21-year-old soldier, and Private Daniel Murphy (Murph), who serve under Sergeant Sterling. It highlights the physical and psychological impact of war and the importance of balancing individual and collective survival. Bartle comforts Murph, who becomes distant and often disappears. He seeks help from Sterling, who predicts Murph will die due to distracted thinking. Murph rebels against the brutal unpredictability of war and chooses to form memories in his mind. Bartle and Sterling find Murph's lifeless body at the bottom of a minaret, tortured to death. Bartle feels sick and sorry for Murph's mother, who will have to see her son's body destroyed. So that they decide to throw Murph's body in the river, pretending not to find it. After returning to the United States, Bartle realizes his war experience is cruel and at odds with civilian attitudes. He is accused of being responsible for Murph's death and learns that Sterling committed suicide. Bartle is sent to prison for Murph's death, finding peace in the absence of social interactions. Eventually after leaving prison, Bartle moves into an isolated cabin, finding peace in the absence of guilt and pain. Thus, the novel shows how war is a powerful force that changes how people live in death zones. This is how the paper looks at some important ideas, like how human life is turned into a commodity, how both victims and offenders are dehumanized, and how violence is kept up as a way to control politics. By looking at how the story shows the psychological, moral, and existential effects of war, this study tries to show what necropolitical power means in modern warfare as a whole.

Literature Review:

The Yellow Birds receives widespread acclaim from prominent newspapers. The New York Times Book Review highly regards this novel, describing it as both concise and impactful, comparable to a footlocker filled with ammunition. Kevin Powers, the author, offers a profound reflection on the vulnerability of humanity and the harsh realities of war. The review encourages readers to pay close attention and engage with the novel's message. (Flood 2012). However, renowned authors also hold this novel, *The Yellow Birds*, in high regard. Philip Caputo, the author of *A Rumor of War*, states that Powers' literary abilities vividly capture the emotional intensity of Americans' experiences in Iraq. War has been a recurring theme in literature since the time of the *Iliad*. Exceptional writings surpass the limitations of their era and conditions to articulate timeless and authentic insights about the conflict itself. *The Yellow Birds* can be classified within that category (Burnside 2012). Benjamin Percy, the author of *The Dead Lands* and *Red Moon*, highly praises *The Yellow Birds*, stating that every sentence is remarkable, with words that gleam and resonate like discarded bullet casings. Kevin Powers, a former Army machine gunner, has authored a highly acclaimed book that has the potential to be the quintessential novel about Iraq (Percy 2014). Daniel Woodrell, the author of *The Winter's Bone*, also commends the musicality of Kevin Powers' writing style. Woodrell states that Powers has produced an outstanding novel about the Iraq war, characterized by its polished, evocative, and vivid prose. The narrative is both lyrical and visually descriptive, with a confident and rhythmic flow. Woodrell considers this story to be relevant not only for the present but also for the future (Kidd 2012). William Leith, the author of *Spectator*, highly praises this dramatic, terrible, and wonderful war story... Kevin Powers, a veteran of the Iraq war, vividly portrays the experience of murdering and coming close to death with a profound sense of negative joy (Marzillier 2013). In addition to receiving accolades from newspapers, writers, and interviews, scholarly research on *The Yellow Birds* has steadily risen throughout the years. Researchers have made extensive endeavors to investigate the news. They conducted investigations into many issues from multiple angles. According to Amelia Precup (2012), *The Yellow Birds'* complex examination of memory is the main topic of Rome. She praises the investigation of memory that covers a wide range of topics, including self-construction techniques, personal history narratives, reenactment, and eidetic representations. She also discusses modern theoretical methods to the mechanisms and potentialities of memory. *The Yellow Birds* highlights the significance of actively engaging with memory content and revisiting it to address the issue of forgetting humanity. It also sheds light on John Bartle's suffering following the loss of his friend during the war and his subsequent return to his homeland. *The Yellow Birds* has been thoroughly examined from a variety of angles in China. For the first time, this novel was briefly introduced by Wang Ai Juan (Wang 2014). She looks at three key imagery from the novel—dust, snow, and ghost—in an effort to examine the imaginative components from the —empathy aspect in light of the author's involvement in the Iraq War. In her paper, she explains three typical images, but she ignores the other most significant images that Powers disclosed in the book, including the river, the hyacinth flower, the yellow birds, Murphy's photograph, and the casualty feeder card. Daniel O'Gorman (2015) discusses three modern books set in England that deal with the current Iraq war: Kevin Powers' (2012) *The Yellow Birds*, Don De Lillo (2010)'s *Point Omega*, and Hari Kunzru (2011)'s *Gods without Men*. He examines *The Yellow Birds* through

the lens of Derek Gregory's "imaginative geographies." Furthermore, he contends that the three novels in question employ the geographically situated in a manner that highlights its topological inconsistency—that is, the erratic ascription of meaning or identity—to a site via political discourse and culture. Furthermore, he contends that in the context of western media representations of loss, the novels help to rehabilitate what Judith Butler has called a dehumanizing "derealization of loss" or "insensitivity to human sufferance and death. (O'Gorman 2015). In her thesis "Imagining the Perpetrator in Iraq War Fiction: Evan Wright's Generation Kill and Kevin Powers' The Yellow Birds" (2016) Karen De Loof focuses on modern trauma studies and investigates the relationship between trauma studies and perpetrator fiction, specifically concentrating on fiction about the Iraq War. The two books she talks about are The Yellow Birds by Kevin Powers and Generation Kill by Evan Wright. Both of these Iraq War novels' authors highlight the role that overwhelming warfare plays as well as the psychological states of the individual soldiers. Kevin Powers assumes the role of the experienced individual, translating his personal experiences and challenges from direct conflict (De Loof 1 It was followed the following year by a discussion of the novel The Yellow Birds' portrayal of grieving by American scholar Joelle Mann (2016). The author highlights that The Yellow Birds portrays a soldier who falls prey to both the brutality of an apparently never-ending conflict and the political and social dishonesty that characterizes modern American war politics. Consequently, The Yellow Birds presents a fragmented narrative that emphasizes the grief of a soldier as well as the national grief that accompanies America's involvement in the War on Terror (Mann 2016). German- scholar Walter (2017) cites Vergil's Aeneid and The Yellow Birds as two modern books that interact with the genre of war fiction. In particular, Walter compares and contrasts these two works admirably while analyzing The Yellow Birds from a variety of angles, including similar stories, the feelings of war, the senses and tradition, and memories-related imagery. Furthermore, it is evident that Walter (2017) observed and examined the imagery, customs, and memories, mentioning the Hyacinth Flower, but he overlooked the key imagery chosen by Kevin Powers for his book, including the river, the yellow ribbon, the snow, the ghost, and the river. In addition, Zeng Yan-Yu discusses three war books in her article: Ben Fountain's "Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk," Kevin Power's "The Yellow Birds," and Phil Klay's "Redeployment." She contended that these three war books exposed the power dynamics and underlying ideology present in the global scene. Based on her analysis, she asserted that these novels bring attention to the unequal power dynamics between nations, reveal the war landscape as a form of consumption, and emphasize the influence of broader political and economic processes such as solipsism, ethnocentrism, and American ignorance of the outside world (Yanyu 2017 AL-Janabi discusses the symbolism of the novel in his article "Critique of the Cruelty of the Iraq War: The Symbolism in Kevin Power's The Yellow Birds". (2019). The psychological struggle that the troops experience is made clear by the symbolism employed in The Yellow Birds. AL-Janabi discusses that the book demonstrates the detrimental psychological effects that such desensitization to violence has on soldiers' psyches as they attempt to come to terms with the horrifying deeds they have both watched and taken part in. (AL-Janabi et al 486 In his article "Survival Psychology in Kevin Powers' The Yellow Birds " (2020), Alosman also delves into the survival psychology that shapes the actions of both Private John Bartle and Private Daniel Murphy, the book's two central protagonists, as well as a few supporting roles. The pre-impact, impact, and post-impact phases—the three main impact periods in survival psychology—are used to analyze the book. Years after leaving the army, Bartle recovers psychologically from his war experience, but Murphy perishes in the depths of battle after losing all of his faculties. Even for those who physically endure these threats, there is no assurance of psychological survival. Those who have such horrific death experiences may be more susceptible to psychological effects like psychosis. (Alosman 139 -147 Gerald Davison's trauma theories, published in 2006, are the basis for Faizal Yusuf Satriawan and Mundi Rahaya's examination of the main character's trauma in a PTSD research based on the same novel, The Yellow Birds. The authors attribute John Bartle's PTSD to the death and destruction he experiences during the Iraq War. The symptoms they discuss include "re-experiencing" when he remembers the events after returning from war and "avoidance," which is the same as "denial" or "undoing." (Satriawan & Rahaya 9 Raihanah, in her article "Post-Heroic Portrayal of War in Kevin Powers' The Yellow Bird" (2022) depicts the war's distorted face in the context of a post-heroic world that is beginning to emerge. Instead of courage and gallantry, post-heroism denotes the collapse of the heroic ethos in the setting of war, leaving warriors to wonder what the real cost of making a sacrifice on the battlefield is. Powers represents the victims of the continuing war on Iraq by placing Americans and Iraqis under the same group, "us," by the narration of death. Those who survived the Iraq War feel guilty and regretful after reading Powers' post-heroic portrayal of the conflict (Raihanah 189).

Theoretical frameworkAs for critical methodology, the present paper utilizes Achille Mbembe's theory Necropolitics(2019) to examine Powers' The Yellow Birds. Mbembe's necropolitics extends Michel Foucault's biopolitics by emphasizing how sovereignty is exercised through the power over life and death. According to Mbembe,Necropolitics refers to the way in which sovereign power "dictates who is able to live and who must die" (Mbembe81 By using Mbembe's necropolitics.we will show how the author represents the brutality and ruthless face of war and its harsh consequences on American soldiers.Through the eyes of the protagonist,Private John Bartle,Powers provides a powerful exploration of the consequences of the Iraq war on those veterans. The reader views how the Iraq War veteran slowly loses faith in life by watching Bartle's life for such a long time. As the novel shows,soldiers are often helpless in battle because what happens depends on the circumstances and not on what they do.

Discussion

According to Mbembe in his book Necropolitics, "The ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die"(81).To kill or to let live thus constitutes sovereignty's limits, its principal attributes .In The Yellow Birds war is personified as a cruel killer.War is depicted as a sovereign power over life and death .As a sovereign entity,it exerts its control by determining who will live and who must die "The war would take what it could get "(Powers 4).Here, Powers tries to show his readers the heavy pain caused by the war and its terrifying images ,and horrible consequence .He illustrates the challenges soldiers have in determining their place against the surrounding death. It is not other soldiers, notions, leaders ,or politicians that seek to harm them ;it is war itself. The war has the ultimate authority over whether the soldiers live or die, they have no controle over their life ,as a necropolitical power, war exerts that control. The novel shows this clearly as it begins with a repeating phrase" the war tries to kill us in the spring"(Powers 3)In a similar situation, the novel shows how war operates as a sovereign power.The soldiers routine preparation of their gun, followed by their recognition that this is" the same old shit again"(powers 7).This reflects how they are dictated and subjugated to the sovereign power of war.they have no control over their lives. It is only war that decides where and when they will fight, when they will die and how long they will survive.This reflects Mbembe's argument that necropolitical power controls the lives of individuals, deciding who lives and who dies(Mbembe 81 Mbembe's idea that in necropolitical systems, individuals are unable to exert any control over their life is clearly shown in the novel. Bartle's reflection that "I didn't die ,Murph did"(Powers 14)highlights the arbitrariness of individuals in war.Bartel's inability to understand why his friend die while he is still alive mirrors the powerlessness of those subjected individuals.In war,soldiers are exposed to random violence and their survival is a matter of chance rather than decision-making.Their lack of control reflects the broader necropolitical structure where individuals are at the mercy of tyrannical forces of violence The novel describes war as an entity that " rubbed its thousand ribs against the ground in prayer" (Powers 3) this description reflects its status as a sovereign power the dictates life and death.This war as Powers writes,"didn't care about objectives,or boundaries,whether you were loved by many or not at all... its sole purpose:to go on, only to go on.And I knew the war would have its way"(Powers 4).The war's primary function is to assert control over life and death ,not to achieve any specific objective.also the war's indifference to objectives or boundaries mirrors the way necropolitical regimes dehumanize individuals ,treating them as expendable .As a necropolitical power, war devalues human life, their lives or deaths serve no purpose other than feeding the machinery of violence.It defines whose lives matter and whose lives is not.This aligns with Mbembe's assertion that"sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not"(Mbembe 96 In necropolitics,the sovereign power is carless to the value of individuals lives ,it's only concern is how to maintain control over those dehumanized people. It exercises controle through the constant threat of death.It considers death as a means of asserting control.The novel shows this when Bartle observes that the knives that killed Murph are addressed "To whom it may concern" this phrase underscores the impersonal nature of death in war.The sovereign power does not concern about the identity of those who are killed .This reflects one of the main key features of necropolitical power.soldiers like Murph are no more than another casualty,their death are not market by any meaning Bartle's reflection on the time he spends with his friend Murph indicates how life quickly is reduced to an experience of survival and loss in war"Ten months,give or take,from that day to the day he died,It might seem like a short time,but my whole life since has merely been a digression from those days,which now hang over me like a quarrel that will never be resolved"(Powers 30).Bartle's wards here, underscores how war becomes a defining force that controls life and death.It becomes a sovereign power that decides human's live and death which conforms Mbembe's idea of how sovereign power dectates who may live

and who must die (Mbembe 81) War which serves as a necropolitical sovereign operates without concern for moral or individual value. It determines who will live and who must die "the war had killed thousand by September. Their bodies lined the pocked avenues at irregular intervals... the war had tried its best to kill us all: man, women, child, But it had killed fewer than a thousand soldiers like me and Murph" (Power 4). The war here is portrayed as an all-power that rendered human lives as something expendable. The lives of soldiers are exposed to this power. This reflects Mbembe's idea that necropolitical systems treat certain populations as "disposable" (Mbembe 96). Further, the sovereign power of war is evident in the novel in the way individuals are reduced to mere statistics. The death of soldiers are treated as part of the numbering system. The way in which Murph and his friend Bartle keep counting how many people die "Nine sixty-eight? Nine seventy?" (Powers 11) reflects the idea that death is no longer considered as a tragic or personal event rather as an inevitable part of the war, something to be counted. The fact that the soldiers are hesitant towards Malik's death whether to a "count" or not emphasizes the idea of how war dehumanizes individuals and turns them into disposable entities. His death is reduced to a number, part of the larger count of casualties that the soldiers are tracking. Again, Bartle's reflection on the banality of individuals in war "You're nothing, that's the secret: a uniform in a sea of numbers, a number in a sea of dust. And we somehow thought those numbers were a sign of our own insignificance" (Powers 12) captures the essence of necropolitical dehumanization. The soldiers understand that their death is appointed in advance, their names are already on the list, waiting to be added once they die. This reflects Mbembe's idea of how sovereign power treating human lives as something expendable and reduce them in to predetermined casualties in a system of control. The soldiers realize that the names of dead were on a list even before their arrival to Iraq reflects a deep understanding of how necropolitics work, effectively reducing lives to mere numbers in a larger system of violence. It also suggests that the soldiers feel a sense of inevitability concerning death, a notion that their live, like those dead soldiers, are decided before by war: we had a sense, something we only felt in the brief flash of synapse to synapse, that these names had been on the list long before the dead had come to Iraq. That the names were there as soon as those portraits had been taken, a number given, a place assigned. And that they'd been dead from that moment forward (Powers 12). The war does not care whether the soldier suffers or not. It concerns only in the way he continues to do his part as the war machine. The novel shows this clearly in the way those soldiers struggle to survive. For instance, Mr. Sterling's act of putting Tabasco sauce in his eyes so he can stay awake during their combat reflects how life is reduced to a constant state of caution. The soldier is no longer concerned with comfort or well-being, his only goal is how to stay alive "He jerked his head back occasionally and swiveled to see if anyone had caught him... held up his trigger finger and daubed Tabasco sauce into his eyes to stay awake" (Powers 6). The soldier's action highlights how life in war zone is not about flourishing, but about how to survive under extreme conditions.

Conclusion

In *The Yellow Birds*, Powers masterfully connects the horrors of war with Mbembe's notion of necropolitics, demonstrating how war functions as a sovereign authority that controls life and death. The novel employs vivid imagery, harsh observations, and emotional representations of soldiers' experiences to illustrate war as an impersonal and dehumanising force that reduces individual agency, rendering them expendable within a mechanism of violence. Soldiers face their mortality, left powerless by the arbitrariness of survival and death inside the necropolitical system of warfare. From Bartle's contemplations on loss and inevitability to the routine endless duties that signify their servitude, war manifests as a ruthless, autonomous entity indifferent to humanity or purpose. Powers aligns his narrative with Mbembe's theories to emphasise the existential dread and dehumanisation inherent in such institutions, highlighting the significant psychological and moral costs endured by individuals caught by sovereign violence. The work ultimately functions as a poignant reflection on the catastrophic effects of war, highlighting its capacity to reduce human existence to mere statistics and render survival a meaningless and difficult task.

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