

**NECROPOLITICS IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN NOVEL: EXAMINING POWER
AND RESISTANCE IN TANSI'S *LA VIE ET DEMIE*.**

By

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Abstract

*Since the emergence of democracy, power has been transferred from the state to the citizen. However, the state or government still has a high influence on the lives of citizens. African francophone literature has always assumed the position of mirroring this high influence in African society. This study probes into the theme of necropolitics, a concept pioneered by Achille Mbembe (2003), and its representation of death in postcolonial Francophone African literature, with a focus on power dynamics and resistance as depicted by Tansi's *La vie et demie*. The study is based on postcolonial theory, which offers a lens through hybridity, neo-colonialism, and subalterns in order to study necropolitics and resistance through a profound textual analysis of the selected text. By examining this work, the study illuminates the multifaceted ways in which necropolitics manifests in postcolonial society. It explores how the oppressed characters (Martial, Chaïdana and the masses) navigate the nexus of power and death of the providential guide and his state actors, while also shedding light on acts of resistance that challenge necropolitical control. Through this exploration, the study warns both state and non-state actors not to take the necropolitical stand because there will always be consequential resistance, as can be vividly observed in the coup d'état that was recently carried out in some Francophone African countries with the hope of having a better country.*

Keywords: Necropolitics, Resistance, African Francophone novel, Postcolonialism

Introduction

In the world of literature, some books transcend the boundaries of fiction and become powerful windows into the realities of the societies they depict. One such work is *La vie et demie* by Tansi, an inspiring novel in Francophone African Literature. Within its pages, Tansi explores a concept that is central to the African experience: necropolitics, as articulated by philosopher Achille Mbembe, refers to the ways in which political power asserts itself through control over life and death. In the context of *La vie et demie*, this concept takes center stage as Tansi explores the heart of power, resistance, and the human spirit within a fictional African nation.

The contribution embarks on a literary journey to dissect the profound theme of necropolitics as it unfolds in *La vie et demie*. It will traverse the vivid landscapes painted by Tansi's words, navigating the struggles of the characters who find themselves ensnared in the web of a tyrannical regime. Scholars have extensively examined Labou Tansi's novel through the lens of necropolitics, recognizing its contribution to the broader discourse on African literature and politics. While there is a limited body of academic work directly focused on *La vie et demie*, it is often referenced in discussions of necropolitics in African literature. Here are some key points that emerge from the existing literature: Tansi, embodying the concept of "homme engageant," serves as a tangible figure in the actual world who acts as the voice for those who have been silenced and oppressed. He champions the cause of the downtrodden, marginalized, and dispossessed (Serigne 112). In doing so, Tansi's work becomes a powerful platform for both highlighting the mechanisms of power that perpetuate oppression and showcase the myriad forms of resistance employed by individuals and communities in their struggle for justice and empowerment. His writings, therefore, synthesize power dynamics and resistance, illustrating how individuals like Tansi can challenge and ultimately transform oppressive systems in their pursuit of social change. According to Muotoo and Enefu, Tansi's debut novel, *La vie et demie*, portrays of African leaders' corrupt and harmful activities in the fictional nation of Katamalanasie (54). This narrative paints a stark picture of a society deeply scarred by corruption, embodying the concept of "necropolitics," where those in power wield control over life and death.

At its core, the study is based on the postcolonial theory, which offers a lens through hybridity, neo-colonialism, and subaltern in order to study necropolitics and resistance by the providential guide and Martial, Chaïdana and the masses, respectively. This is achieved through textual analysis of the literary text *La vie et demie*, which mirrors the complexities of African societies grappling with oppressive governance.

Brief summary of *La vie et demie*

This is a story that strongly condemns African dictators and their cruelty, likely drawing inspiration from Mobutu Sese Seko, the former dictator of what was then known as Zaire. The story begins shockingly when the Providential Guide, the country's leader, abruptly leaves his dinner to brutally attack Martial, the opposition leader, in front of Martial's family. The Guide tries various methods to kill Martial, including stabbing, shooting, and poisoning him, but Martial refuses to die until the Guide dismembers him.

Martial's spirit continues to haunt the Guide and his successors, appearing to them and the people. Meanwhile, Martial's daughter, Chaïdana, defies her father's wishes and eliminates the ministers. She also seduces the Guide and the ministers in different disguises. The story becomes increasingly fantastical as it follows the successors of both Chaïdana and the Guide. In essence, this is a peculiar and disturbing tale that unmistakably reflects Tansi's critical perspective on how African dictators ruled their nations in that period and even now. He describes the novel in the beginning as a fable that envisages tomorrow using the eyes of today (10). In Tansi's *La vie et demie*, the concept of necropolitics in Francophone African literature is explored, revealing a profound examination of power dynamics and resistance. Through the lens of necropolitics, Tansi illuminates how oppressive regimes exercise control over life and death, and how individuals and communities respond with various forms of resistance, ultimately highlighting the resilience of the human spirit in the face of brutal authoritarianism.

Postcolonial theory, Necropolitics and Resistance

Post-colonial theory emerged in the 1960s after the independence of most African countries, when scholars from the formerly colonized territory started examining the impact of colonialism and imperialism on the colonized people and their land. Despite these countries being independent and

democratic, colonial traits such as corruption, dictatorship, brutality, injustice, nepotism, tribalism, hybridity, etc. were still present. Edward Said, a Palestinian professor, influenced this theory in 1978 with his work “Orientalism,” which criticizes western representation in the East. Other scholars, such as Homi K. Bhabha’s work on cultural hybridity, are prime examples of this approach. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak handles the subaltern school of thought of postcolonial theory. It is important to emphasize that the postcolonial era accounts for power, in which the term ‘subaltern’ is used to depict marginalized groups—the ‘lower classes’ and agency (Lilja 205). This concept is crucial to comprehending how marginalized communities exercise agency, i.e., the ability to act and make choices, in a society that frequently seeks to disempower them. It stresses the significance of acknowledging the voices and agency of people who have been historically oppressed and marginalized in the power structures of postcolonial societies. Neocolonialism explores the new form of colonialism in a postcolonial state. These aspects of the theory are essential to this contribution. Mbembe's necropolitics is encompassed in neo-colonialism, which is tackled below.

Necropolitics perceives sovereignty as the power to determine who is important and who is not, who can be easily discarded or disregarded, and who cannot. In essence, it is the ability to make crucial decisions about the value and importance of individuals or groups within a given jurisdiction. This definition was given by Mbembe in 2003, using the slavery and colonial era: “...sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not” (27).

Therefore, there are people the state holds in high esteem and those who are marked for death. This death state is what Mbembe calls “death worlds”: “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (40). Living dead is experiencing life-in-death, which involves feeling abject and excluded, as it entails constantly finding oneself outside the boundaries of the people whom the state aims to safeguard, with no hope of inclusion.

Necropolitics involves the power of a state, which an aspect of this article seeks to examine in the novel. Another aspect is resistance, which, according to Encyclopedia Britannica, evolves from the nonconformity of opinion, opposition to the government, and the state police or secret police,

along with other institutions of compulsion, are used to enforce the orthodoxy of the proclaimed doctrines of the state.

In his article, "The definition of resistance" Mona Lilja believes that power and resistance are a single binary that intermingle, whereby they influence each other:

The close relationship between power and resistance, then, implies that resistance not only challenges or provokes power but sometimes ends up supporting power. For example, when a few people opt out and refuse to cooperate, these few differing 'others', who are deviating from the norm, expose themselves to the risk of being defined as abnormal (204).

As much as resistance can be positive or negative, in a study that involves death, the resistance must certainly be positive. Necropolitics has emerged as a prominent theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of power, death, and resistance in postcolonial African societies, particularly within the context of Francophone African literature.

In this context, power is wielded ruthlessly by the leaders who exploit their authority for personal gain, resulting in the suffering and dispossession of the people. However, the novel also illuminates the resilience of individuals and communities who resist this oppressive regime. They engage in acts of resistance, demonstrating their determination to challenge the corrupt system and strive for a more just and equitable society. Thus, through the textual analysis of *La vie et demie* the themes of necropolitics, power dynamics, and the struggle for resistance in the face of pervasive corruption are encapsulated.

The subjugation of life to the power of death in *La vie et demie*

Alison Dundy translated the novel to "Life and a Half" (*La vie et demie*), which was penned by Sony Labou Tansi in 1979, is a compelling fable that explores the concept of necropolitics in the fictional nation of Katamalanasia. This novel is set in a speculative future but is deeply grounded in the present-day reality of a postcolonial state, providing a thought-provoking examination of necropolitics within a literary context. Tansi's novel immerses readers in the fictional country of Katamalanasia, which symbolises the corruption, mismanagement, and political erosion present in numerous post-colonial African societies. Authoritarian leaders maintain power, inciting

instability and a sense of precariousness. The book's title, *La vie et demie*, reflects this vulnerability, highlighting the human experience within a flawed system.

The state persecutes, imprisons, and eliminates certain populations so that political and social contestations can be neutralized. The lieutenant, who is escorting Martial, the opposition leader, to Guide Providentiel's chamber states "Here is the individual". The Guide Providentiel now has his formidable enemy, Martial, directly before him. He calmly grins before gradually sliding the knife against Martial's throat (11-12). In the passage, the actions align with the idea that the state eliminate certain populations to quell political and social contestation, as seen in the persecution and elimination of Martial, the opposition leader. The lieutenant, serving the state's interests, escorts Martial to confront Guide Providentiel, the dictator, who embodies the state's power and authority. As the scene unfolds, we witness the state's oppressive tactics. The "cool smile" on Guide Providentiel's face represents the calculated and unemotional exercise of sovereign power. When he "smoothly slides the knife against Martial's throat," it symbolizes the state's ruthless and lethal measures to suppress opposition.

On the other hand, the violent incident took place in front of Martial's family since they were incarcerated. This is a vivid portrayal of necropolitical social death. The sight of Martial's family members- his wife, Nelanda, Nala, Zarta, Assam, Ystéria, Tristansia and Chaïdana witnessing this traumatic occurrence emphasizes the wider effects of necropolitics on communities and families. Family members are compelled to observe the termination of the existence of a cherished individual, both in a literal and figurative sense. The actions of the state bring about both the demise of Martial and the collapse of the social fabric surrounding his kin, which is marked by fear, trauma, and the violation of fundamental rights. The narrator observes that Chaïdana, Martial's daughter,

«elle était devenue cette loque humaine habitante de deux mondes: celui des morts et celui des "pas-tout-à- fait-vivants" comme elle disait elle-même » (17).

"had become a human wreck existing in two spheres: that of the deceased and that of the not entirely living, she said it herself"(my trans.;17)

Chaïdana's dual existence illustrates the ramifications of living under a regime of Guide Providentiel that enforces social death, by depriving his people of their rights and humanity. This portrayal underscores the impact of necropolitics not only on those who are physically eliminated but also on those who survive, leading to perpetual trauma and blurring the distinction between the living and dead in both social and psychological senses.

Another aspect is the necropolitical “link of enmity” in the novel, this can be observed in the narrator’s flashbacks to three years earlier when Martial was accused of being «traître à la patrie et assassin de la cause populaire» (29), "a traitor to the fatherland and a murderer of the people's cause"(my trans.;17) a charge that affects all Martial's relatives, near and far, and all women who desires to sleep with or had slept with Martial were suspects under the decree of the Guide Providential. The government, led by the Guide Providential, employs Martial as a scapegoat to solidify its authority. By portraying Martial as a state enemy and a menace to society, the regime rationalizes the severe actions taken against him and his allies.

This method also highlights a critical element of necropolitics; the normalization of hostility. It implies that in Katamalanasia, those in power maintain and augment their dominance by fabricating and prolonging adversaries. The use of animosity as a means of justifying the exertion of power, even at the cost of human life, is a disturbing depiction of how despotic regimes manipulate 'the enemy' to quash political opposition and maintain their hold on power. The targeting of individuals associated with Martial, including women who had relationships with him, reinforces the far-reaching nature of necropolitics, which encompasses not only the perceived threat but also anyone linked to it. This highlights the regime's willingness to sacrifice the lives and freedoms of many for the sake of retaining power.

Chaïdana seduces the Guide Providentiel at “La Vie et Demie” hotel, but before going to bed with her, he discovered Martial's body in their room as warned by the fortune teller Kassar Pueblo, he left the room naked shouting Martial's name. Later, «l'hôtel fut soufflé avec dynamite, corps, clients, patrons, personnel et biens. Comme douze Français, sept Américains, et deux Allemands avaient officiellement péri avec l'hôtel» (70), “the hotel was destroyed by dynamite, resulting in the loss of guests, patrons, staff and property. Among those affected were twelve Frenchmen, seven Americans, and two Germans who were officially registered as guests of the hotel”. The

Guide, however, presents a falsehood that the attackers were mercenaries' intent on assassinating him. This resembles the use of mercenaries by countries to execute acts of violence, normally for political motives. Essentially, this situation highlights the necropolitical approach of states engaging mercenaries in mass killings or violent acts. The text exemplifies how states can dispense violence, deflecting responsibility to proxy actors while achieving their objectives. This is a harrowing demonstration of how the state can exploit external agents to retain control, even at the expense of human lives and veracity.

Subalterns and resistance in *La vie et demie*

Resistance can be carried out for different purposes which include power struggles. The analysis above is based on power in asymmetrical situation while this will be analyzed against asymmetrical situation as suggested by Lilja.

Individual and magical reality in resistance

The Providential Guide and dictator acts on behalf of the state in the beginning of the novel, assassinates Martial the opposition leader, thinking that his problem is solved. However, the dictators met strong resistance physically and spiritually until the end of the story. Martial resistance is for good governance and not to wrestle power from the dictators. When the Providential Guide's doctor facilitates Chaïdana's escape to l'hotel La Vie et Demie, she observes from her window the unrest between her father's supporters and army, she remembers one of her father's statements « L'indépendance, ça n'est pas costaud costaud »(41) "Independence doesn't come cheap and easy" (my trans.;41). The statement serves as evidence of Martial's beliefs and motivations. His daughter's recollection of it after his passing, bolsters the notion that his resistance was founded on principles such as independence and good governance, rather than a direct pursuit of power. This influence of a character's ideals and values, even after their physical presence has ceased. The passage offers an understanding of Martial's personality and the legacy of his defiance, underscoring the significance of his beliefs within the story.

The resistance aspects of this novel all start with Martial. When he is captured and slaughtered, he resists his death, saying so multiple times « je ne veux pas mourir cette mort» (13), "I don't want to die this death". Martial's statement serves as repetition, accentuating the significance of his life

and his determination to resist passively the brutality of the regime. This resistance stands as a powerful and dramatic focal point in the story, highlighting the character's courage and steadfastness in resisting the forces of necropolitics, despite facing death. Martial's rejection of 'this death' represents a wider defiance of degrading practices and state-sanctioned violence, revealing the robustness of human fortitude when confronted with extreme hardship.

After Martial's death, the Providential Guide could not sleep due to the reappearances of Martial's remains in his bedroom, according to the omniscience narrator for a month «...le Guide Providentiel n'avait pas fermé l'oeil une seule nuit, » (20) "the Providential Guide had not slept a single night". The haunting presence of Martial, even after his physical death, carries profound literary symbolism. This is a form of resistance that transcends the boundaries of life and death, showcasing Martial's enduring presence and influence in Katamalanasie. This manifestation serves as a reminder of the injustices and violence inflicted upon him and his people by the state, representing an enduring challenge to the oppressive regime's authority. Martial's spirit's persistence in the bedroom of the Providential Guide signifies that his ideals and resistance to the regime endure, and they plague those accountable for his death. This spiritual resistance of Martial's attests to his steadfast devotion to the cause of good governance and his refusal to be silenced, even in death. This device highlights that his actions had a lasting impact and his legacy inspires others to resist political oppression. It also implies that perpetrators of violence and injustice may suffer eternally while their victims' spirits challenge them.

Subtle and subversive form of resistance.

Martial's life has a great impact on his daughter Chaïdana, especially when she is forced to eat her father's remains. She decides to avenge her father's death. She kills many ministers and loyalists of the regime with her method of seduction and "amour au champagne", i.e. poisoning their champagne. The effect is usually a general paralysis which manifests itself a few weeks after the love-making with Chaïdana and cannot be traced back to her. These consist of subtle and subversive form of resistance.

By using her allure and love for champagne, she subverts the power dynamics embedded within the oppressive regime. Chaïdana exploits her gender and position to access those in authority,

which unveils the potential for resistance to arise from unexpected sources. This portrays a reversal of traditional power roles, where the oppressed undermine and challenge the oppressors. Chaïdana's acts of seduction and poisoning represent a form of poetic justice and revenge. By luring and incapacitating the regime's ministers and loyalists, she enacts a form of retribution for the suffering that her father and people endured. The narrative gains poetic justice when the oppressors face consequences for their actions.

Although Martial's resistance was more overt and centered on his dedication to good governance, Chaïdana's resistance takes on a more personal and vengeful form. This contrasting display of individual versus collective resistance highlights the complexity of resistance movements, as different characters employ diverse strategies to confront the regime.

Collective resistance

When Martial's people distribute leaflets showing, «... le budget national était un fleuve où se jetaient deux océans : l'océan de la propagande et l'océan des besoins du guide et de ses FS...» (132), they liken the national budget to a river with two streams: one being propaganda and the other being the needs of the guide and his SFs (the army for democracy and the Republic). This makes things in Katamalanésie remain static and hellish. Katamalanésie is compared to hell by the citizens. The Guide Jean-Oscar-Coeur-de-père issues a command for all books to be burned. Through the leaflets, they symbolically resist the government's manipulation of resources for its own propaganda and security forces. The ocean of propaganda represents the government's efforts to control the narrative and maintain power through disinformation. The ocean of the Guide's needs and his security forces reflect the prioritisation of the government's interests over the well-being of the people. The resistance of Martial's followers continues with a letter to the Guide informing him that hell cannot be burned. This led to a series of wars between Darmellia Martial's followers, headed by Chaïdana.

Summary and Conclusion

Tansi's *La vie et demie*, explores the concept of necropolitics and how dictatorial regimes exercise control over life and death in a fictional African country. The narration vividly depicts the barbaric nature of the Providential Guide, a dictator reminiscent of previous African despots, and his merciless behaviour towards Martial, the opposition leader. This leads to social death and trauma. Martial's resistance, as shown in his refusal to comply with his death sentence, serves as a powerful literary tool. Even after his passing, his spirit is a continual challenge to the oppressors and haunts the Guide. The narrative also highlights the multi-layered features of resistance, from Chaïdana's covert actions to collective opposition against resource exploitation. *La vie et demie* provides a potent reflection of the intricate dynamics of power, survival, and resistance amidst authoritarianism in postcolonial Africa. Through this exploration, the author warns both state and non-state actors not to take the necropolitical stand because there will always be consequential resistance that leads to instability, as can be vividly observed in the coup d'état that was recently carried out in some Francophone African countries with the hope of having a better country. Therefore, all hands must be on deck in order to discourage every necropolitical device that seeks to decide who lives and who dies in the nation.

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