

Gaza Verse* to Rehumanize the Dehumanized: Poetics of Palestinian Resistance in the *Gaza Verse

Parami Ranasinghe, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This paper explores the poetic representations of Palestinian resistance against the recent genocide in the state of Palestine. *Gaza Verse* which is the primary source of this study is a 2025 publication of the Gaza Poets Society founded by the poet and journalist Mohammed Moussa in 2018. The present study focuses on the voices of Palestinian poets and poets of different nationalities from all around the globe who contribute to an ongoing cause for the freedom of Palestinians by rehumanizing the dehumanized Palestinian bodies and narratives through poetry. While acknowledging the impossibility of fully grasping, decoding or understanding the lived realities and the unconscious of the Palestinian struggle, the study highlights the crucial necessity of initiating a global discussion on their lived experiences as it eventually poses a challenge to the dominant discourses and misrepresented narratives on Palestinian identity, belonging and resistance. While incorporating Achille Mbembe's theories on sovereignty, necropower and necropolitics, where sovereign entities practice power over the life and death of certain groups of people as the theoretical framework, this study explores the "superhumanization" of the Israeli entity led by Benjamin Netanyahu verses the infra-humanization and dehumanization of Palestinians as represented in the *Gaza Verse*.

Keywords: Palestine, genocide, poetry, necropolitics, sovereignty

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Introduction

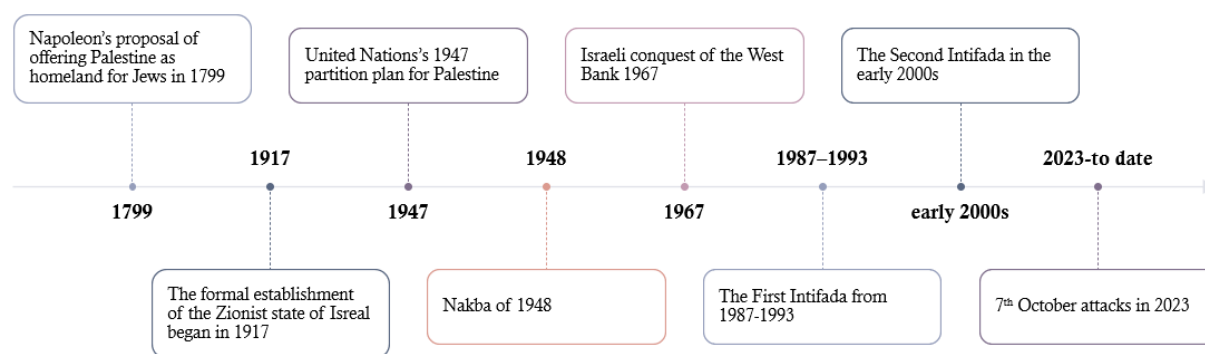
Can the *other*, in light of all that is happening, still be regarded as my fellow creature? When the extremes are broached, as is the case for us here and now, precisely what does my and the *other's* humanity consist in? The other's burden having become too overwhelming, would it not be better for my life to stop being linked to its presence, as much as its to mine? Why must I, despite all opposition, nonetheless look after the *other*, stand as close as possible to his life if, in return, his only aim is my ruin? If, ultimately, humanity exists only through being in and of the world, can we find a relation with *others* based on the reciprocal recognition of our common vulnerability and finitude? (Mbembe, 2019, p. 3)

The relevance of the above quote from Achille Mbembe's seminal text *Necropolitics* to the present study lies in the fact that humanity consists of, though it is often overlooked, the reciprocal recognition of humanity's common vulnerabilities and finitude, while not taking advantage of the vulnerabilities of the "other" while hiding "mine". This study derives from the idea that the genocide¹ currently happening in Palestine, in addition to many other wars and armed conflicts happening all around the world, including Congo, Sudan and Lybia must draw the humanity's attention to the conditions in which it is happening and the conditions which have historically sanctioned such genocidal attempts starting from the Nazi Germany to the modern day Palestine and Congo.

In terms of the historical backdrop of this geopolitical controversy regarding Palestine and Isreal, according to Chomsky and Pappé (2015, as cited in Adell, 2024) the genocide in Palestine originated as a result of a colonial project. Figure 1 below provides a sketch of the history of Israeli-Palestine problem which will be further elaborated in the next paragraphs.

Figure 1

History of the Israeli-Palestine Problem



Establishment of a Jewish state was not merely for modern political development, but it was also a colonial project of which the roots stretch back to Napoleon's proposal of offering Palestine as homeland for Jews in 1799. The first wave of Jewish settlers reached Palestine in 1800s and their attempt to expand the land they were given were constantly challenged by the

¹ The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory reported on 16th September 2025 that Israel has committed "genocide" against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. The report states that Israel committed four of the five genocidal acts defined by the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, namely killing, causing serious bodily or mental harm, deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about the destruction of the Palestinians in whole or in part, and imposing measures intended to prevent births (OHCHR, 2025).

native Palestinian population. The formal establishment of the Zionist state of Israel began in 1917 with the British Mandate for Palestine when the British foreign secretary Arthur J. Balfour produced a written declaration expressing support for “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people” (United Nations, 2025). During the Mandate, from 1922 to 1947, there was a large-scale Jewish immigration, mainly from Eastern Europe, the numbers gradually increasing during the 1930s with the Nazi regime in Germany and the Holocaust.²

Consequently, in 1947 the Palestine problem was passed on to the United Nations leading to the adoption of Resolution 181 (ii) of 1947, outlining the partition plan for Palestine in order to create a separate Jewish state for the Jews and an Arab state for the natives. This is marked as the driving factor behind the 1948 conflict between Jews and Palestinians popularly known as the *Nakba* of 1948 or the “original sin” as referred to by anti-Zionists.³ During the *Nakba*, many Palestinians were forcefully driven out of their native lands, and the Institute for Palestinian Studies state that 70% of the Gaza’s inhabitants are Palestinian refugees driven out of their homes and lands during the genocidal assaults waged by Israel since 1948 (2024, cited in Adell, 2024). The year 1967 marked another crucial milestone with the Israeli conquest of the West Bank and the establishment of Israeli military control in the occupied Palestinian lands. The first Palestinian uprising called the *First Intifada* occurred from 1987–1993 with Palestinians rising against Israeli occupation due to various reasons such as illegal land confiscation, home demolition, arbitrary arrests, restrictions of movement and trade, employment and limited access to resources. It is during this period that a Palestinian Islamist militant group called Harakat al-muqawama al-Islamiyya (Hamas) was organized with the goal of establishing an Islamic state in the land of Palestine (Abu-Amr, 1993, Pappé, 2017, as cited in Adell, 2024). The period of 1990s marked peace negotiations such as the *Oslo Accords* between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel, even though these attempts failed to bring lasting peace.

The second Palestinian uprising called the *Second Intifada* erupted in the early 2000s increasing the tensions and casualties in the Gaza strip. Following the re-election of Benjamin Netanyahu as the Prime Minister of Israel in 2015, Israeli- Palestinian conflict was further lengthened. Most recently, the 7th of October attacks in 2023 led by Hamas killed more than 1,200 people and at least 252 people were abducted to Gaza as hostages according to Israeli sources (Human Rights Council, 2024). Israel answered this incident with extreme violence as Israel’s reaction was not only directed towards Hamas but the native Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip as well. The West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip are currently under illegal occupation by Israel and humanitarian aid is blocked by the Israeli government and many Palestinians have been abused, incarcerated without trial in Israeli prisons. Despite the humanitarian crisis in the occupied Palestine, United Nations humanitarian aid missions and many other non-government organizational missions have been and continue to be disrupted by Israel. On the 22nd of August 2025, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Famine Review Committee confirmed that Famine (IPC Phase 5) was occurring in Gaza. On the 16th of September 2025, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory stated that “Israel has committed genocide against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip” (United Nations, 2025).

² Holocaust, the systematic state-sponsored killing of six million Jewish men, women, and children and millions of others by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during World War II.

³ Anti-Zionism is the opposition to the political ideology of Zionism, which supports the establishment and maintenance of a Jewish state in Israel, and it is distinct from anti-Semitism.

Therefore, the present study attempts to explore how in this backdrop, a poetic representation of Palestinian struggle, *The Gaza Verse* (2025) attempts to rehumanize the dehumanized Palestinian bodies and narratives through poetry and how it functions as a powerful form of resistance.

Research Objective

- To explore how *Gaza Verse* rehumanizes the dehumanized Palestinian bodies and narratives through poetry

Research Questions

- How does *Gaza Verse* explore the infra-humanization⁴ and dehumanization⁵ of Palestinian bodies and narratives poetically?
- How does *Gaza Verse* reflect the Palestinian struggle as a form of resistance against sovereignty and necropolitics?

Literature Review

This section reviews and synthesizes existing research related to the scope of the present study based on the key themes: Palestinian poetry, memory, identity and resistance. It identifies a considerable gap in literature based on the interconnection between Palestinian resistance and contemporary poetry written on the Palestinian struggle.

While there are existing studies on the language of resistance in the poems written during the latter half of the twentieth century by the poets: Samih Al-Qasim, Mahmoud Darwish, and Tawfiq Zayyad (Boayrid, 2019) and studies on the Palestinian poetry of 1970s (Ashrawi, 1978), there is a considerable lack of research conducted on the contemporary poetry on the Palestinian struggle.

Recent studies such as *Between Exile and Elegy: Resistance, Memory, and Identity in Palestinian Literary Voices* (Shabana, 2025) and *Genocide and Resistance: An Analysis of Palestinian Poetry* (Adell, 2024) based on both twentieth century poetry and modern poetry on the Palestinian struggle reflect how poetry functions as a form of resistance against the occupation. Abdullah and Hassan (2025) in their paper *Emerging voices of resistance: A postcolonial perspective on noncanonical selected Palestinian poems after the 7th October 2023 attacks* explore the noncanonical writings on resistance by contemporary Palestinian poets. Therefore, based on the literature review, the present study identifies a gap in literature based on studies conducted from 2023 to date on the current genocide and contemporary poetry written not only by poets of Palestinian origin but writers, activists and humanitarians from across the world, reflecting the poetics of resistance while contributing to the ongoing struggle for the freedom of Palestinians.

⁴ Infrahumanization is the belief that one's own group is more human than other groups, which are perceived as less human.

⁵ Dehumanization means treating individuals or groups as non-humans, denying them dignity, moral consideration, and essential human qualities.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This is a qualitative study conducted using Critical Discourse Analysis, as *Gaza Verse*, the primary source of the present study has been explored and analysed using Achille Mbembe's socio-political theory on necropolitics, closely related to concepts such as sovereignty, necropower and biopower.

Necropolitics is “the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die” (Mbembe, 2019, p. 66) It derives from the Greek word “nekros” meaning “corpse” (Altawaiji et al., 2025). Sovereignty, as defined by Mbembe is “to exert one’s control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power” (2019, p. 66).

While criticising an imperialistic approach to sovereignty, Mbembe asserts that his concern is about those figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations. For instance, the genocide happening in Palestine. Therefore, to kill or to let live constitutes sovereignty’s limits, its principal attributes. Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics derives from Michel Foucault’s theorization of “biopower” which means the domain of life over which power has asserted its control. Mbembe (2019) asks two questions about biopower while laying the foundation for his theory on necropolitics.

1. What does the implementation of such a right (to determine who must live and who must die) tell us about the one who is thus put to death and about the relation of enmity that sets such a person against his murderer?
2. Can the notion of biopower account for the contemporary ways in which the political takes as its primary and absolute objective, the enemy’s murder, doing so under the guise of war, resistance, or the war on terror?

He demonstrates that the notion of biopower is insufficient to account for contemporary forms of violence, putting forward a theory of necropolitics, to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating “death-worlds”, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the “living dead”.

The present study therefore incorporates the theory on necropolitics to conduct a close reading of three selected poems from the *Gaza Verse*, and notes that the contemporary forms of necropower blurs the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom as reflected in the *Gaza Verse*. The three poems were selected out of the eighty-two poems and artwork published in the 2025 issue of *Gaza Verse*, based on a thematical categorization in relation to the focus of the present study on dehumanization and infrahumanization of Palestinian bodies, lives and narratives.

Discussion

The first poem that appears in the *Gaza Verse* (2025) titled “For Anas al-Sharif” written by Tanisa Gunsekera can be explored and analysed in relation to the dehumanization of Palestinians as a political strategy of elimination. Anas al Sharif was a Palestinian journalist known for his courageous reporting from Gaza, where he became a prominent voice for the Palestinians. He was killed tragically on August 10, 2025, in an Israeli airstrike that targeted a tent where he and other journalists were reporting outside the Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City.

His death sparked outrage on social media platforms condemning that the attack is a blatant assault on press freedom. Prior to his death, he faced accusations from the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) of being affiliated with Hamas, which were widely rejected by human rights advocates (Al Jazeera, 2025; Arham Online, 2025). Selected verses of the poem are quoted below.

All I keep thinking is those doing this stiff in
suits have never known and will never know
the joy of lifting (or watching a loved one lift)
a most beloved baby high above your smile
bouncing in the air safe in loving hands
protected

Joy like your belly filling with ripples
when your hands are tickled by the
giggles that vibrate their ribs

The sweetness of a toddler's kiss
that sends stardust zooming round your cheek.

Anas Jamal Al-Sharif knew joy.
He loved and he is loved. His joy, his tears, his smile, his heartbreak,
his strength, his tenderness, his love will be remembered.

They cannot understand joy.
Joy like jumping off a truck into a brother's
Arms, hugs heavy enough to lighten feet, laughs
carrying tears, kisses on cheeks, hands that
hold each other's heads high, the shared
weight of a press vest under siege.

Anas Al Sharif knew joy.
They – loveless, stiff, unmoveable in suits – have money and tactics
and papers and drones; nothing but emptiness cloned.

(Gunasekera, 2025, lines 1–14 and 24–32)

As opposed to the Palestinians often dehumanized by Israel, the poem implies that the non-humans are in reality “they, who cannot understand joy”. By placing the humane existence of Anas al sharif, “who knew joy” versus Israelis who only “have money, tactics and drones”, the poet hints at the driving force behind necropolitics; the sovereign right to kill the “other” through dehumanization, as Israel did in killing Anas al Sharif through false accusations of labeling him a terrorist affiliated with Hamas. Mbembe (2019) states that this sovereign right to kill can be seen as a common element of state power in modernity. The Nazi state was the most complete example of a state exercising the right to kill, and Israel continues the same inhumane legacy. To Israel, Anas al-sharif was the “other” who spoke against the empire and therefore had to be tactically labeled a terrorist and eliminated. Mbembe (ibid.) writes on this account that “the perception of the existence of the ‘other’ as an attempt on my life, as a mortal threat or absolute danger whose biophysical elimination would strengthen my life potential and

security” is one of the many imaginary dimensions characteristic of sovereignty in both early and late modernity (p. 72).

Moreover, the means through which the powerful entities eliminate the “other” is often mechanized, in this case, through an airstrike, but historically through guillotines and gas chambers as well. Mbembe (2019) demonstrates how in France, the advent of the guillotine marked a new phase in the “democratization” of the means of disposing of the enemies of state and how the gas chambers and ovens were the culmination of a long process of dehumanizing and industrializing death of the Jewish population in the Nazi Germany. Mechanization of death therefore not only impersonalizes the ways of killing but also aims at disposing of a large number of victims in a relatively short span of time. For instance, the Israeli air-strikes have been mechanizing killing on mass scale from the beginning of the genocide to date. Therefore, in this light, sovereignty can be defined as the occupation of both land and life, and occupation means relegating the “other” to a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood; the place in which she or he can be killed under the guise of war.

Another poem published in the *Gaza Verse* titled “Lullaby” written by Marwah El-Murad can be explored in relation to the dehumanization and inhumanization of Palestinian children. The poem reads as;

When I was seven I broke my toe
My mother held me and told me to think of the
Palestinian children whose pain and suffering
I’ll never know

Now I’m 32 and I put my daughter to bed
and I think of the Palestinian mothers
whose pain and suffering I’ll never know.
I kiss her toes

my baby is wrapped in white
like theirs
but tomorrow
she will wake.

(Murad, 2025)

The poem reflects how two groups of children, namely the Palestinian children and the non-Palestinian children who are geographically apart in the same world, live in two contrasting realities merely based on the socially constructed nationalities assigned to them at birth. Furthermore, the flashback of the poet of breaking a toe at the age of seven and her current age of thirty-two gestures at the prolonged conflict between Palestine and Israel, affecting many lives, including generations of infants and children. Moreover, this poem draws attention to a post on X (former Twitter) posted and later deleted by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, referring to Palestinian children in Gaza as “children of darkness” in the wake of the Hamas assault on 7th October 2023, in contrast to Israeli children whom he refers to as “children of light” (Figure 2). It is often visible on social media how Israel uses this dehumanization rhetoric to justify massive military operations in Gaza by portraying Israel as a morally superior victim under assault.

Figure 2

A Post Posted and Later Deleted by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on X



Note. From The New Arab Staff, 2023

The central role that poetry as a form of art plays in resistance against the subtle manipulation of language in mainstream media is evident here as Murad (2025) reiterates that Palestinian children, though exposed to extreme violence since birth, have the same human rights as any other child for they safety, education and the right to live. Murad (ibid.) therefore writes against the Israeli rhetoric of dehumanizing Palestinians through the elimination of marginalized groups as the *other*. It can be further explored in relation to necropolitics, as Mbembe (2019) has written on this account that when groups of people are “othered”, seeing the “other” dying turns into satisfaction based on the belief that the dead person is another. It is the death of the other, the other’s physical presence as a corpse. However, by placing the suffering and fears of Palestinian mothers and non-Palestinian mothers parallelly, Murad (2025) questions why a certain group of children face unfair deaths when their only crime was their mere existence.

Furthermore, the spatial dimension of occupation in relation to the Palestinian struggle has been explored in the poem “War on roots” by Ameera Abuali. Selected lines of the poem are mentioned below.

They call it war on terror
 But terror defines the state that steals,
 That displaces, colonizes, and calls it blessed,
 That settles and shakes hands with the West
 Is terror the children, the mothers, the men
 Starved, bombed, and then buried again?

They exile us, make us strangers on our own land.
 They call the state democratic and free,
 But what democracy when it’s built on the wreckage of me?

But we still resist.
 Here we are, here I stand
 A fascist empire built on Indigenous Palestinian land.

(Abuali, 2025, lines 1–12)

Mbembe (2019) writes that territorial fragmentation is one amongst the major characteristics of the occupation in Gaza and the West Bank. It means the sealing off and expansion of settlements. This process has a twofold objective: to render all movement impossible and to implement forms of separation on the model of an apartheid state as reflected in this poem; “they exile us, make us strangers on our own land/ A fascist empire built on indigenous Palestinian land” (Abuali, 2025).

This poem can also be analysed in relation to Mbembe’s concept of the politics of verticality (2019). He states that the resultant form of sovereignty might be qualified as vertical sovereignty, since under a regime of vertical sovereignty, colonial occupation operates through schemes of over and underpasses, a separation of airspace where the ground itself is divided between its crust and the subsoil. Similarly, Abuali (2025) writes in her poem; “they pick on us like vultures circling prey/ like fire through the forests, they burned what they sowed/ uprooting olives our roots for European pines that explode”. These lines further reflect the territorial dimension of the genocide and the vertical sovereignty as Israel uproots the Palestinian olive trees as a means of erasure of Palestinian identity and culture (Al Jazeera, 2025) (The Palestinian Information Center, 2026). Moreover, the battlegrounds are not located solely on the Earth’s surface as Israeli drones operate as psychological warfare; “they pick on us like vultures circling prey” (Abuali, 2025). Even the airspace boundaries are divided between lower and upper layers and the symbolics of who is on top are reiterated everywhere. Occupation of the skies therefore acquires critical importance, since most of the policing is done from the air (Mbembe, 2019).

Therefore, the selected poems from the *Gaza Verse* analysed from the theoretical framework of necropolitics, exemplify the lived realities of the Palestinian struggle poetically. It is further evident that the poetics of Palestinian resistance records the infra-humanization and dehumanization of Palestinian bodies and narratives while resisting against the powers of sovereignty and necropolitics.

Conclusions

In examining poetic representations of the genocide in Palestine, it becomes evident that poetry serves not only as a medium of artistic expression but also as an urgent form of testimony and resistance, since through these deeply personal narratives, poets transform collective trauma into language while refusing the erasure of their identities, histories, cultures and resistance. In addition, these poetic expressions challenge the dominant narratives misrepresenting the Palestinian struggle by rehumanizing the dehumanized groups of people, and by humanizing loss and suffering often reduced to statistics in military reports and mainstream media. These poems are in fact a timely reminder that the realities of Palestinian struggle is beyond the mainstream political discourse surrounding the genocide. The present study at the same time hints at possibilities of conducting more academic research on the genocide in Palestine, not merely for the sake of publication or documentation, but also as an extremely powerful way of resistance.

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Contact email: paramijagadakshi@gmail.com