

**Conceptualizing ‘Necropoetics’: A Cultural Materialist Reading of Necroeconomy in Nisha Patel’s “432-615-719-1827-?”**

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With every passing decade of late- capitalism, the world economy is gradually entering into a “new space of capital that profits in killing and death, not to produce commodities but as the commodity itself- a necroeconomy” (Haskaj 2). Unlike the Foucauldian biopolitics, in this “economy of death” (Haskaj 16), the loss of human life is never seen as the loss of capital; instead, an alternative production of necro-capital which not only quantifies human death but also ‘monetizes’ it. Consequently, the shadow line between ‘letting die’ and ‘making die’ gets increasingly blurred and obfuscated (Smith 63). Thus, disposable ‘death subjects’ are politically manufactured whose biological vulnerability and economic value (for the necroeconomy) are proportionately entangled. In other words, necroeconomy thrives on expendable ‘necrotariats’ whose lives matter fundamentally “in their negation” (Haskaj 1). But what happens when a poem ontologically emulates the “economy of death” (Haskaj 16) and continuously thrives on cadavers? Can it (the poem) be seen as a living paradox of protest surviving on human death? That’s what this paper will explore by reading closely Nisha Patel’s poem- “432-615-719-1827-?”. Drawing on contemporary necro-theorists like Mbembe, Fatmir Haskaj, Roberto Esposito, and so on, this paper will explore how the Covid-economy at its peak also became the economy of death and disposability. Finally, the paper will also look into different connotations of ‘death’ in this poem, where death does not merely refer to the physical death of Covid bodies but also to the meta-physical death of trust and faith in the existing socio-political order.

**Keywords-** necroeconomy, necropoetics, disposability, necrotariats, late-capitalism.



## Introduction

The age of late capitalism, needless to say, is precisely the age of neo-liberal economy where it is not only human life but also the negation of it i.e., death, that gets quantified and measured in terms of economic capital. Unlike the bio-economy, whose focus remains solely on the monetization of living labour, this era of late- capitalism is entering into a 'necro' space where economic battles are won and lost over the commodification of death. In this “economy of death” (Haskaj 16), selected human subjects are gradually transformed into “discrete, monadistic, isolated object(s) floating in a world market” (Haskaj 7-8) who are ultimately governed only by the logic of “profit accumulation” (Haskaj 7-8). They become the exact antithesis of what a neo-liberal consumer is and, therefore, the “social excrement” (qtd. in Haskaj 8), the human waste whose economic value lies in their death. Death, it is crucial to remember, is never seen as a loss of capital in the necroeconomic world; rather an unconventional source of capital that turns the most neglected aspect of one's political self (death) into the most productive space of monetization. With this paradigm shift in the production of economic capital, the shadow line between ‘making die’ and ‘letting die’ is increasingly blurred (Smith 63) so as to turn the unemployable and surplus population into killable necrotariats whose life matters only in their negation. The death of a necrotariat, as Haskaj rightly points out, need not necessarily be the physical death but the metaphysical “death of the personhood” (16), which allows the necroeconomy to treat these redundant bodies as nothing more than living corpses. Hence, these death subjects are often strategically manipulated to work under such precarious circumstances where the economic production of capital is otherwise impossible. Thus, the literal pawning of precarious lives to impending death becomes one of the essential prerequisites for the production of capital in a necrospace.

With this theoretical grounding, this paper is going to argue that the Covid economy, at its peak, invariably became the “economy of death” (Haskaj 16) which undoubtedly “prioritize(d) some lives over others, making explicit who is ultimately ‘Killable’ ” (Smith 61). At the initial stage, this paper will closely read specific cultural texts of the past in comparison with the events recently unfolded during the Covid outbreak in order to establish how the excess population, in different chronotopes, have always been sacrificed “in the quest” of “a flourishing and efficient economy” (Smith 61). The succeeding section will analyse Nisha Patel’s poem “432-615-719-1827-?” in constant reference to the aforementioned incidents in order to find out how cultural texts often find their representation in literary texts and thus narrow down the chasm between ‘Samaj’ (society) and ‘Sahitya’ (literature). Carrying forward this argument, the final section of this article will probe into the genre of ‘necropoetics’ in order to gauge its effectiveness as a literary tool of cultural resistance. In relation to this, the paper will also talk about the possibility of necro-historiography in verse which ensures an alternative archiving of the invisible killing often sponsored by the necropolitical state.

## Necroeconomy: A Cultural Materialist Reading



The first cultural text that this paper plans to analyse in order to unravel the concealed contours of necroeconomy is the notorious 'Zong' massacre. Fatmir Haskaj, in his paper "From biopower to necroeconomies: Neoliberalism, biopower and death economies", has rightly pointed out how the entire episode of killing can be seen as one of the first necro-economic ventures where selected entities were deemed more valuable when dead than alive (3). In the year 1781, the British ship 'Zong' carrying hundreds of insured African slaves, lost its path due to some serious navigational errors and consequently ran short of drinking water. As a result, there was a high possibility of several slave deaths due to water- scarcity, which would have been economically disastrous for the slave owners as natural death is never covered by any insurance policy. Hence, in order to avoid this serious economic loss, more than 130 enslaved people were thrown into the sea over a period of three days (Lewis 364) so that these deaths could be projected as accidental and thus fall under the purview of the insurance policy. Thus, it's quite clear how those slaves were never recognized as autonomous living entities by the owners; rather they were perceived as living cadavers whose primary duty was to produce a maximum "quantum of value" (Smith 70) even through their ontological negation. What is even more interesting is that fifty-four children and women were thrown out on the first day, which clearly indicates the subtle "hierarchy of killability" (Lopez and Gillespie 182), i.e., certain lives due to their gender and age were considered least valuable when alive. Even in the court trial, the argument was never directed towards the culpability of homicide but always moved around whether these deaths come directly under the claws of the insurance policy. As a result, the initial verdict strangely went in favour of the slave owners, which legally established those dead human subjects as mere cargos under the existing protocol. Though this verdict was later revoked, it clearly tells how even legal clauses do sometimes commodify particular human subjects.

Apart from this incident, the Opioid epidemic in the USA can also be seen as another indirect yet equally lethal instance of necroeconomic massacre where the shadow line between 'making die' and 'letting die' was indeed erased (Smith 63). Purdue Pharmaceuticals, one of the business giants in the USA, launched an alleviative drug, 'oxycontin', which involves the risk of serious addiction owing to its high morphine content (Smith 68). Within no time, a large number of people (primarily young) became addicted to the drug, and nearly fifty thousand people, as the report suggests, died due to its overuse (Klobucista). Despite being well informed about the increasing death rate, specifically among the marginalized section of society, the government preferred to remain absolutely inert due to serious corporate pressure. Purdue Pharmaceuticals, being one of the giant companies, was already making a huge contribution to the country's economy, and hence, selected people were left to die a slow and miserable death because it was symbolically their death that was literally propelling the country's economy. Multiple reports clearly corroborate that the peripheral strata of the society mostly had to bear the brunt of this pregnant silence and meaningful nonchalance offered by the government (Smith 70). It was only in the year 2016, as Smith writes that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offered only loose medical guidelines and no enforceable laws for prescribing this drug (69-70). Thus, it becomes quite evident that "alongside the figure of Homo Sacer, the one who may be killed with impunity, is another figure, one whose death is no doubt less spectacular than the first and is the



object of no memorial or commemoration: he who with impunity may be allowed to die, slowly or quickly, in the name of the rationality and equilibrium of the market” (Montag 17).

A close reading of these two cultural texts of the past clearly suggests how 'death subjects' are often manufactured socially and sacrificed politically in the name of the larger welfare of the country and the growth of the market. The Covid economy, at its peak, was no exception to this politically manoeuvred necro-culture. The next section of the paper, with the help of some contemporary instances, will establish how, during the entire Covid era, the same necro mechanisms were constantly at play all around the globe in a more refined and subtler form.

The First instance that can be referred to is the age-based rationing of life-saving medical equipment like ventilators subtly promoted by different governments through state-run hospitals. These hospitals prioritized the relatively young patients and systematically deprived the older population while distributing a limited number of ventilators. Thus, a large number of older men and women were left to die helplessly without any medical care (Stevis-Gridneff et al.). This official decision of age-based medical equipment distribution may seem apparently pragmatic and logical, yet the concealed logic that often triggers this kind of decision is essentially the logic of necro-economy. In sharp contrast to the productive young generation, the capitalist necro-culture often projects the ageing bodies as mere non-performing assets which will ultimately become a burden to the economy. Hence, it is not their presence but their absence (through death) that becomes desirable. It not only saves the young exploitable labour for the future but also eliminates the non-productive load from the economy. In a way, it is the death of the older ones that symbolically gets converted into economic currency. Not only this, like that of the notorious 'Oxycontin' (the drug that induced the Opioid epidemic in the USA), multiple unauthorized drugs were launched in the South Asian market as a quick fix for Covid without any care for public health at large. For example, 'Coronil', launched by the Patanjali group, was claimed to be an effective immuno-booster without any certification from either WHO or IMA ("Explained: Why Is Maharashtra Planning To Ban Coronil"). The presence of some of the then ministers in the same press meet where 'Coronil' was claimed to be effective as a "supporting measure in Covid-19" ("Explained: Why Is Maharashtra Planning To Ban Coronil") understandably raises serious questions. One of the ministers even went on to the extent of saying – "The Rs 30,000-crore industry for Ayurvedic products which grew at 15-20% per year is growing at 50-90% after Covid" ("Explained: The row over Patanjali's Coronil") which indicates both the official acquiescence and the latent capitalist motive camouflaged under the rubric of promoting India's glorious Ayurvedic tradition. The real agenda, as can very well be presumed from the statement itself, was never really to salvage the lost glory of the Ayurvedic epistemic tradition but to use its residual nostalgia for sheer necroeconomic profit. It is the same necroeconomic motive that also gave rise to the murky debate in favour of reopening the economy despite the virus. World leaders like Boris Johnson quite intentionally advocated the theory of 'herd immunity' in spite of knowing the enormous amount of death it may cost (Smith 62). It, in a way, clearly revealed the covert necroeconomic agenda of multiple nation-states who were more than willing to let a selected population die ironically to keep the economy alive. Smith, in his essay, further observes how the then-American President Donald Trump, too, was in



favour of the premature reopening of the economy despite being fully aware of the probable adverse effects (62). Trump even goes on to proclaim in one of his later interviews - "... will some people be affected? Yes. Will some people be affected badly? Yes. But we have to get our country open, and we have to get it open soon" ("President Trump Wants to Reopen Economy"). What is important to note here is the use of the phrase 'some people', which should never be mistaken as a reference to the indefinite 'some'; rather, it is inevitably a reference to the specific 'some' belonging to the social periphery. In a polarized neo-liberal society, it is extremely crucial to understand that neither 'iso-temporality' nor 'iso-spatiality' (Kaviraj 682) can guarantee isomorphic economic immunity (from Covid) for all citizens. Trump very well knew that contrary to the popular opinion about the Covid virus being the great leveller, not every stratum of the society is equally susceptible to the hazards of the virus. It's inevitably the weaker margin that becomes more vulnerable owing to its regular and obligatory exposure to the risk zone. Therefore, Trump's "some people" are inevitably synonymous with Bauman's "social excrement" (qtd. in Haskaj 8), at whose cost the great wheels of necroeconomy often run. This is exactly what Nisha Patel, the erstwhile poet laureate of Edmonton, has echoed in her poem- "432 – 615 – 719 – 1827 - ?"

### **Understanding 'Necroeconomy' through Literature**

Nisha's poem can actually be seen as the necropoetic form of alternative historiography that archives the systematic endangering of the surplus population. It simultaneously unravels the nuanced political demarcation "between 'apprehending' and 'recognizing'" (Butler 4-5) of different forms and social manifestations of life. While the elite stratum of a society is often 'recognized' and consequently empowered by the political governmentality, the surplus population, with a minimal individual agency, is merely 'apprehended,' i.e. acknowledged and perceived "without full recognition" (Butler 4-5). Nisha goes on to corroborate how the economically weaker section and the migrant population are tactically forced to work in high-risk necrospace under the constant threat of punishment. Even her "best friend is called back to the medical floor she once left under the threat of punishment and takes to sheltering inside herself while wealthy men dine out at Earl's Restaurant" (Patel). The government very often camouflages this strategic production of death subjects under the rubric of free choice when the reality is that every choice offered to these necrotariats is nothing more than Hobson's choice – "None of the staff would choose this, I'm sure, if they had any choice at all" (Patel). It is precisely this lack of choice that systematically transforms "the surplus population and the unemployed and the unemployable into death subjects" (Haskaj 8). They are forced to "bring disease home, unable to quit their jobs when the government demands rent to be paid in full" (Patel). Thus, their already vulnerable lives are systematically subjected to 'precarity' simply through differential exposure to injury, disease and death (Butler 25). To explain, Butler has clearly argued that precariousness is the inbuilt and default condition of each and every life due to its sheer ontological ephemerality (25). However precarity, on the other hand, is such a "politically induced condition in which certain populations.....are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and exposure to violence without



protection” ( Butler 25-26) due to their “failing social and economic network of support” (Butler 25). Nisha further explains, with everyday examples, how selected lives are politically made precarious through covert economic strangulation, which often forces the impoverished youth to work day in and day out under the shadow of impending death as fast food delivery agents. Thus, the entire economic structure surreptitiously aids the capitalist business owners to double their profit precisely by accumulating the “capital from below.... not through surplus value (cheap labour) but rather through surplus populations that are (re)produced as death subjects, as people whose role in the economy is to be victims” (Haskaj 16). Interestingly, those who cannot be turned into expendable ‘death subjects’ are often identified as illegal refugees who are to be thrown out of the national boundary at any cost. The repressive state apparatuses are directly enforced to torture the ‘trespassers’ out of the country irrespective of the decadent human rights provisions and even more impotent media presence - “Architecture supporting homeless folks in the downtown core is seen as trespass, while public lands go unused.....the police are directed to slash tents and trash belongings without a care to the cameras filming” (Patel). Thus, these marginalized bodies are ironically shoved into a strange paradoxical situation where they are left with “no other than to appeal to the very state from which they need protection” (Butler 26). In return, the necropolitical state, true to its default character, imposes the subtle differential prioritization of varied bodies depending solely on economic efficiency. As a result, certain types of bodies are identified as productive and hence welcomed, while the others (the deviated figures from the standard norm of fitness) are generally seen as disabled liabilities. This capitalist refusal to accept the plurality of bodies is mainly triggered by the internal necroeconomic fear of unproductivity that has been culturally associated with aged bodies and bodies with adipose. Hence, the socially accepted 'fit' bodies naturally become furious over unproductive fat bodies being given “their first doses of vaccinations sooner, arguing that disability makes fat people less worthy of life” (Patel). Even the ageing bodies are also left to undergo ungrieved deaths “in private care homes” (Patel) without any medical facilities as the necropolitical nation firmly holds onto the inherent assumption of absolute unproductivity of the overaged population. Thus, each precious life lost, owing to the sheer necroeconomic bias, “remains... abandoned by the government” (Patel). Even the immigrants, irrespective of their health, are expected to work extra hard in order to achieve the status of “good immigrants” (Patel) in the eyes of the nation-state. Their death is often overlooked and treated as collateral damage necessary for the necroeconomic boom. Thus, these “peddling defiance” of selected lives “for the sake of the economy” often “spit on the lives and graves of thousands of workers...” (Patel) who end up becoming mere casualties of necroeconomic war. This politically orchestrated defiance as well as ungrievability of different Covid bodies (be it an ageing body, a body of a refugee, or even the body with adipose) expose the dark existential as well as experiential state of living without a life (Butler 8) and simultaneously reveal the extreme redundancy of these bodies when alive – lives “that will never have been lived” (Butler 15). Without grievability, these bodies often exist biologically sans any social acceptance because “the differential allocation of grievability...decides...who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?” (qtd. in Lopez and Gillespie 9).





However, these ungrivable entities, as already proclaimed by Montag, should never be conflated with the Agambenian 'Homo Sacer' precisely because "the lives in question are not cast outside the polis in a state of radical exposure," and it is also "not the withdrawal or absence of law that produces precariousness, but the very effects of illegitimate legal coercion itself, or the exercise of state power freed from the constraints of all law" (Butler 29). It is precisely this politically engineered illegitimacy of the very legal framework that transforms killability into an insignificant, mundane, and everyday affair. What is imperative to note here is that making 'killability' mundane is more problematic than the act of killing itself (Lopez and Gillespie 3) precisely because this dangerous normalization of the necro-economic violence brings at its wake the shivering possibility of absolute obedience to the totalitarian state – a state that is for the economy, by the economy, and of the economy. However, one of the most potent ways to resist this menacing normalization of necro-economic violence is to perform the classic Butlerian (Judith Butler) tactic of grievability – be it bodily grieving or grieving through logos. This poem, too, is actually the poet's conscious logocentric effort to mourn for these unrieved lives because grieving "is not merely a solipsistic act of wallowing in our own sorrows; rather, it is both a political act against and a way of making political, the suffering and oppression of others. Grief acknowledges that the life, suffering, and death of a body matters" (Lopez and Gillespie 10). This poem becomes exceptionally relevant in the sense that it records and historicizes these unrecognized sufferings and mournings at the very micro level, which is extremely crucial for sustaining any effective and long-term political resistance. The next part of this paper will specifically focus on the vital importance of continuous archiving and historicizing of these micro-narratives through the literary tool of 'Necropoetics'.

### **Necropoetics: Conceptualizing the Necro- Historiography through Poetics**

Now, this part of the paper will re-conceptualize the genre of 'Necropoetics' specifically in the context of Nisha Patel's poem - "432-615-719-1827-?" The idea of 'Necropoetics' has previously been utilized by Renee Fox in his paper - "Robert Browning's Necropoetics" in order to portray the Brownian art of giving imaginary voice to the dead characters through the re-animating poetic use of dramatic monologue. As Renee rightly puts it- Browning's necropoetics is precisely the quasi-imaginary and "quasi-spiritualist voicing of" (qtd. in Fox 464) the "intransigent bodies of the past" (Fox 464) who resurrect in and through the poetic 'logos' of Browning- the dead reasserting itself through Brownian poetic diction. However, in Nisha Patel's poem, the whole familiar trope of "verbal resuscitation of the dead" (qtd. in Fox 464) goes through a paradigm shift as it is not the characters who are alive in the poem, but the poem itself becomes the living corpse sans any permanent structural closure. The poet herself proclaims-"The following poem is a living thing, as its inspirational and beloved inhabitants once were. For every preventable and tragic death due to COVID under our governments, I have added one word to this ongoing poem" (Patel). Thus, challenging Roland Barthes' idea of "death of the author" in a structural sense, Nisha takes complete control over the poem as with every 'avoidable death', the author not only re-inscribes but also re-enlivens her authorial self in order to add new



dimensions to the existing dump yard of the dead. Like that of a graveyard, the poem becomes the metaphorical vault where all the neglected dead bodies are symbolically stored in the form of 'undead' words - the alphabet rendering itself into a living corpse. Thus, deviating from the classic Barthesian stance, the recurring birth and rebirth of the 'undead' poem as well as the poet are not only coterminous but also a corollary to the death of every necrotariat - the dead human subjects constantly bestowing life on the 'undead' poem. Though Patel claims this poem to be a 'living thing' owing to its structural non-closure and repeated resurrection of the authorial voice, it is actually the resurrection of the already dead poetic self and, therefore, becoming of the 'undead'. In a necroeconomic structure, the poetic self is always considered dead due to its absolute ineffectiveness. The poet herself is quite sceptical about the political potency of these dead and emasculated words to bring any social change. She writes- "Us artists working to keep our loved ones entertained are considered less than dogs to most leaders while real dogs are in high demand, breeders birthing puppies that will grow up overwhelmed and overstimulated" (Patel). Therefore, to the poet herself, this necropoem seems nothing more than a pulsating alphabetical presence feeding on human cadavers yet without any effective agency normally associated with living beings. But again, with every 'avoidable death' (Patel), the poet, contrary to her previous stance, keeps adding new 'undead' words to this poem which paradoxically suggests her subterranean belief, even if faint, in 'necropoetics'. This inherent ambivalence is what makes the poem extremely complex and open to multiple interpretations. The poem undoubtedly unfurls the immediate inadequacy of the poetic self in the neo-liberal order where poets themselves, owing to their non-contribution to the economy, become the figurative necrotariats whose poetic presence is symbolically erased instead of their physical presence. However, that does never make necropoetics as a literary genre completely irrelevant because every necropoem, though apparently impotent, has its inner potential to destabilise and defamiliarize the entire discourse of grand history. Each necropoem, in a particular sense, can become one of the most precious cultural documents that archive the necro-cultural violence at the very local level, which would have otherwise become the almost invisible footnote of national historiography. Necropoetics, as a genre, can really be seen as an alternative form of micro historiography that gives voice to the otherwise silent sufferings of the wasted lives. Here, this poem too undeniably renders a political voice to the dead subjects of Edmonton precisely through the necropoetic use of 'undead' words. Writes Patel- "I took one word for everybody in this province who died a preventable death, and wrote a poem. Eighteen-hundred twenty-seven words, one for every child that grew and loved under the hands collective negligence". In fact, it is not only the neglected bodies that are literally 'dead' in this entire context, but the poem simultaneously serves the purpose of cultural resistance by signifying the symbolic death of trust and faith in the existing socio-political order – "And, mostly I think about death. How my faith in politics died first in a refrigerator truck, then a field hospital" (Patel). This symbolic death of trust as cultural resistance is never a closed affair but a continuous one, which actually inspires the poem's non-closure. What needs to be understood is that the structural non-closure of this necro-poem is what triggers the essential non-closure of the necro-history that requires the continuous resurrection of authorial intent in order to re-archive the ever-growing suffering of the necrotariats in this capitalist order. That is why the final question mark of the title- "432-615-719-1827-?" is truly emblematic of the final question that the poet asks at the very end of the





poem – “How eloquent it will make me tomorrow?” (Patel). The non-presence of its answer is what entails the tripartite non-closure: the non-closure of this necro-poem, the necro-history, and, most importantly, the non-closure of necro-cultural resistance.

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