



**'Death-worlds' and 'care of the self' – Re-invoking Foucault  
in mapping the literary reflection of Mbembe's necropolitical  
'death-worlds' and resistance in Neel Mukherjee's *Choice*.**

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**Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to read Neel Mukherjee's latest novel, *Choice*, in the light of Achille Mbembe's concept of 'death-worlds' developed in the essay *Necropolitics*. Mbembe opines that Foucault's notion of biopower cannot adequately explain the contemporary 'power of death'. A close textual analysis of Mukherjee's novel reveals that the incorporation of another important concept of Foucault- 'care of the self' – may be considered to be an important factor shaping and influencing the lives of the marginalized characters like the illegal immigrant Salim, or poor villagers like Pulak and Sabita who are all forever dwindling in the 'death-worlds' in this novel. The textual analysis also reveals that the 'logic of survival' that Mbembe explains in relation to 'death of the other' may often be oriented towards self, family and community (as reflected in Ayush's emphasis on empathy and understanding in a world dominated by economics or in Emily's donation of kidney to Karim), thereby unveiling the possibility of an ethical and of resistant mode of living, however futile these may seem to be. The intervention of Foucauldian 'care of the self' with its extended signification of embracing the care of the 'other' in understanding the aspirations and struggle of 'death-worlds' in this novel thus turns out to be a validation of Mbembe's concluding observation about the blurring of boundaries between 'resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom'.

**Keywords:** death-worlds, care of the self, bio-power, resistance, freedom.



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## Introduction

One of the key factors in our world is the politics surrounding death. Literature, like other disciplines, has been quite naturally alert to respond to its various ambiguities. Political, social, economic, psychological, and many other factors contribute to people's habitation in the space of marginalization that Achille Mbembe has termed 'death-worlds', which are devoid of security and care. Is there any way out? Is there any resistance offered by people of the 'death-worlds'? While Mbembe cites some of the resistant responses (most of which center around death) like suicide bombing and argues that our civilization has travelled farther from the reflection of Foucauldian biopower, it is the concern of this paper to argue that resistance of such marginalized people can revolve around life and care, the twin aspects related to another of Foucault's later theoretical coinage—the care of the self. In an age of transdisciplinary thinking this paper seeks to explore the literary reflection of the 'care of the self' of people in the 'death-worlds' in the latest novel of a novelist whose works have always been replete with characters who have withered in the 'death-worlds', but not before voicing or attesting their resistance.

## Understanding Death-worlds

Achille Mbembe is one of the initiators of the concept of necropolitics, first developed in his article 'Necropolitics'. The goal of Mbembe's article has been to understand and explain the contemporary forms of sovereignty focused on death as reflected in cases like the South African apartheid or the Israel-Palestine conflict. Mbembe argues that such contemporary modes of 'subjugation of life to the power of death' (necropolitics) cannot be satisfactorily explained by Foucault's concept of bio-power, which is chiefly concerned with life (Mbembe, 2003, p.39). According to Mbembe, one of the major consequences of necropower in the contemporary world is the formation of 'death-worlds' which he defines as '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' (Mbembe, 2003, p. 40). Mbembe not only talks about the collective experience of death-worlds but also about the resistance exercised in the 'spaces of everyday life' like the suicide bomber (Mbembe, 2003, p. 36). The question is whether, even when such resistance is operating on the modalities of death, is the focus on life forever absent? Mbembe himself asserts that in the contemporary scenario, 'the disciplinary, the biopolitical, and the necropolitical are combined' (Mbembe, 2003, p. 27). And therefore, it can be safely deduced that the rejection of Foucault's notion of biopower is never carried to the extreme. On the other hand, the little acts of resistance that Mbembe frequently cites may invite the intervention of another Foucauldian formulation—care of the self—as an effective tool or strategy of fight in the death-world.

## 'Care of the Self'

The concept of 'care of the self' is associated with the later phase of Foucault's career, which is marked by the so-called 'ethical turn' of his critical theory. This concept is discussed exclusively in the third volume of his *The History of Sexuality*, titled *The Care of the Self*. The same concept has been explained and elaborated in many other works and seminar talks by Foucault, under terms such as 'hermeneutics of the self' or 'technologies of self'. As studied by Fruchaud and Lorenzini, Foucault's lecture series 'The Hermeneutics of the Subject' of 1981-1982 and several

other lectures of 1982 deal with the 'care of the self', the culmination of which occurred in the third volume of *The History of Sexuality* (Fruchaud, 2021, vii-viii). In all these deliberations, Foucault traces the evolution of the care of the self from the Greco-Roman tradition to the Christian one. According to Foucault, the care of the self in its Platonic-Socratic conception was primarily a preparation for political future and secondarily, one of revelatory and exploratory self-knowledge; while the early Roman imperial culture extended its significance to a lifelong practice relating to desire, passion and even spirituality: 'A new form of subjectivity is thus constituted through practices such as reading, writing... as well as a series of exercises or tests...' (Fruchaud, 2021, p. xiii). Foucault sees in Christian tradition an inversion of the ancient practice of care of the self, whereby extensive practices have been lost. Foucault thus looks upon the Roman imperial period as the acme of the practices of care of the self. Some crucial 'functions' relating to it were a 'critical' one, another of 'struggle', and the third of a therapeutic one. The critical function is one of unlearning and avoiding the traps of 'all bad habits and false opinions' (Foucault, 2024, p.76). The second one is one of permanent struggle, as an individual has 'to fight his entire life' (Foucault, 2024, p.77). In the therapeutic function, the role of writing becomes one of the prominent techniques of the self. One of the chief features of the care of the self is that it embodies concrete practices: 'What I mean is that this culture of the self was not just a philosophical idea, but it really was a practice, a social and an individual practice' (Foucault, 2024, p. 84). Foucault is aware of the fact that in the course of human history the care of the self 'becomes broader and its meanings are both multiplied and modified' (Foucault, 2005, p. 10). It is in these extended significances that we need to interpret our contemporary problems, since Foucault categorically points out that looking back to antiquity never provides us with ready solutions but only enables us to better understand our problems.

Now, is this self in 'care of the self' a selfish or self-centered one? Or is this a step towards ethical development of concern for others? Critics are divided in their interpretation of Foucauldian care of the self. For instance, Ella Myers discovers 'specter of solipsism' in Foucault's formulation of 'care of the self' and argues that it is actually limited in its scope by emphasizing the isolation of individuals rather than solidarity with others (Myers, 2008, p.138). McLaren, on the other hand, reads Foucault's later work as an exploration of the 'self as social, as being constituted through relations to others' (McLaren, 1997, p. 111). Foucault's own observations are quite clear on this point: 'Around the care of the self, there developed an entire activity of speaking and writing in which the work of oneself on oneself and communication with others were linked together... Here we touch on one of the most important aspects of this activity devoted to oneself: it constituted, not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice' (Foucault, 1986, p.51). Here, 'social practice' evidently points out the cohesive connections between self and others. And more importantly, this relationship with other/others is not one of exploitation and domination, but of mutual trust, assistance, and bonding: 'But it is sometimes the case, too, that the interplay of the care of the self and the help of the other blends into preexisting relations, giving them a new coloration and a greater warmth. The care of the self... appears then as an intensification of social relations' (Foucault, 1986, p. 53).

Since this care of the self is an attempt towards developing bonds with others, it can be safely assumed that it is poised as either subtle or manifest resistance against domination. In the

words of Nicolet-Anderson, ‘This reflection on an ethics of the self also emerges as a possible option for resisting the disciplining and normalizing effects of bio-power’ (Nicolet-Anderson, 2012, p. 173). That is why Foucault himself has argued about the necessity of considering ‘technologies of the self’ together with ‘techniques of domination’ (Foucault, 1997, p.177). Following Edward McGushin, Sarah Posman contends, ‘The care of the self that Foucault argues for is less self-love than an agitated state of self-reflexivity—*souci* in the French title *Le souci de soi*, means worry more than tenderness—in which one continuously checks oneself, and strives to attain a state of freedom by mastering oppressive forces rather than being enslaved by them’ (Posman, 2017, p.186). The next section will try to explore how care of the self in its extended sense of care for others may be considered to be a mode of resistance in the death-world of domination and control in Neel Mukherjee’s *Choice*.

### Care beyond calculation

The very first section of Neel Mukherjee’s *Choice* depicts the pervasive presence of economic calculation. ‘Neel Mukherjee’s *Choice* tackles economics, identity, and the burden of morality’, writes Tabish Khair, and he adds that the three sections of the novel have in common ‘the stony backdrop of economics’ (Khair, 2024). The novel projects multiple confrontations between Ayush and Luke, for whom the question is always the larger economical one, as he is a staunch believer in ‘the truth of numbers over the truth of representation’ (Mukherjee, 2024, p.11). Ayush, on the other hand, tries to assert the role and significance of the little acts and contributions of an individual in bringing about effective change in the future. For Ayush, ‘everything hinges on the individual’ as he firmly believes that ultimate solution ‘lies within private choices’ (Mukherjee, 2024, p.101). The family life of Ayush and Luke as a gay couple is dominated by economical calculation, which is reflected in the repetition of Luke’s motto—‘Economics is life, life is economics’—throughout the first section of this novel. The conflict between Ayush and Luke goes so far that at one point, Luke moves away to his parents’ home for a weekend. Ayush constantly suffers from psychological anxieties in his personal as well as professional realities, making life difficult for him. His constant suffering in his home as well as in his workplace, caused by his unconventional points of view, makes his life a veritable ‘death-world’ against which he struggles desperately to retain sanity and sense.

Sayari Debnath observes that Ayush’s humanitarian concerns are fake: ‘His noble pursuits are often propelled by staggering displays of self-pity. The concern that he shows towards the environment, or livestock, or the poor, seems like a gimmick to compensate for his own insecurities about race, profession, and earning capabilities’ (Debnath, 2024). But the fact is that Ayush desperately tries to practice differently in actual life. Chakraborty justifiably says that Neel Mukherjee successfully explores Ayush’s ‘agony, his insomnia, as absorbingly believable’ (Chakraborty, 2024). His concrete practices and his desperate efforts to translate his apparently unusual ideas into palpable reality are what invite the application of Foucauldian ‘care of the self’ in his case. When the novel opens, we find Ayush showing a film about the cruelty to and preservation of animals to his children. Later, we find him engaged in everyday practical research, like the reduction of energy and water consumption. He gives away money to charities of climate change. When his partner Luke asks him whether he was ‘indoctrinating the kids’, he confidently asserts that he was only teaching them about ‘choices and their consequences’ so that they can question the ‘so-called naturalness’ of our daily habits and activities (Mukherjee,

2024, p.23). Ayush wants to live life differently and wishes for a different humanitarian future for the children. When he finds Luke teaching prime numbers to the children, he broods, 'Will the children learn about the things that really matter in both life and in the living of a life, things such as plants and flowers and insects and birds and trees, not just about prime numbers, and market forces, and resource allocation, and preferences?' (Mukherjee, 2024, p.74). The children once innocently asked him about their male parents. Ayush realizes instantly that they are asking like 'something learned by rote, delivered without thinking' (Mukherjee, 2024, p.84). He playfully explains, 'Well, some things are wrong to some people, and others not... We can live together happily, with each of us, or groups of us, thinking different things, doing different things, but loving each other' (Mukherjee, 2024, p.84).

Ayush once comes across Ritika Santosh, an economist. When she shares her experience of a project of transfer of assets to eradicate poverty, Ayush expresses his concern with the 'tiny fraction' of the project that failed (Mukherjee, 2024, p.78). Ayush is also ill at ease with the profit motive dominating in the publication industry where he works. The international publishing industry 'pushes the definition of literary towards whatever sells' (Mukherjee, 2024, p.8). Ayush is persistently aware that the celebrated 'nobility and indispensability of literature' hides 'what is ultimately business' (Mukherjee, 2024, p.43). He is often baffled by the money-centeredness of human civilization at the expense of other serious issues. The novel consistently projects him as a person who is always 'at war with whatever or in whatever he finds himself, never settling, or settling down, with what is given' (Mukherjee, 2024, p.32). Critical reflection on oneself or thinking critically about one's own opinions and actions is an essential part of Foucault's 'care of the self'. Diana Taylor interprets that the individual's 'critically reflective activity' can enable 'new and different ways of relating to ourselves and others' (Taylor, 2011, p. 173). Ayush clearly exhibits such activities in his everyday life, especially in his rearing of the two children. What is more important, his understanding of the lives of trees, animals and the force of environment and his earnest efforts to infuse this sensitivity to the children is at par with what Foucault interpreted as the expanded notion of the care of the self and asserted that the '*epimeleiaheautois* an attitude towards self, others, and the world' (Foucault, 2005, p. 10).

In such a time of easy accessibility of information and advertisement, a writer called M.N. Opie refuses to reveal any personal information to the publisher. By such constant refusal to disclose even the contact number, Ayush is thrilled to realize that this writer is refusing 'to play the game' (Mukherjee, 2024, p.55). The thought of M.N. Opie boosts up Ayush's confidence in crisis as he interprets Opie's decision as 'an act of defiance, two fingers to the world...' (Mukherjee, 2024, p.100). The frequent references to M.N. Opie's case amidst the description of Ayush's discomfiture with the money-driven publishing industry highlight the value of an individual's resistance through refusal.

### Care and Cure

The second section of the novel is the story of Emily, who faces an accident and then suffers from a psychic breakdown. Instead of contacting the police, she meets the driver, Salim, who turns out to be a refugee from Eritrea. Emily once wanted to write a novel based on the colonial roots of her mother's family. She urged her mother to remember stories of 'conflicts and fighting and bombs going off' in colonial India (Mukherjee, 2024, p.151). She was thus

more interested in the stories of oppression and domination rather than the glories of colonialism. She even argues with her mother over this issue. Her contact with Salim enlightens another shadowy part of contemporary affairs. She transcends the barriers of language, class, race, and many others in her interaction with Salim. She probes into the unjust system of labour and wages of ride apps. She comes to learn that he works as a substitute for his ailing brother, Karim. Salim first escaped from war-torn Eritrea to Sudan and then to Libya for the promise of a 'regular job, a better life, papers' (Mukherjee, 2024, p.169). But he was sold as a slave again, and still he dreamt of 'a new life, a better life, a decent working life' in Europe (Mukherjee, 2024, p.170). He was able to reach Italy, and then London, and eventually realized that there was no escape from his death-world: 'I no see difference between Eritrea and Europe—I not free in any place' (Mukherjee, 2024, p.172). Knowing about Salim and writing about him matured Emily immensely and helped her get rid of her anxiety and depression. The therapeutic function of care of the self that Foucault discussed as one of the major features of ancient culture is manifested here in Emily's case in her care for others. Not only that, Emily's multiple conversations with Salim at various places, her patient listening to his narratives that constantly provokes doubt and authenticity may be considered to be modes of ancient culture of 'askesis' (self-training) that, according to Foucault, included 'abstinences, memorizations, examinations of conscience, meditations, silence and listening to others' (Foucault, 1982, p. 246-7). Emily donates a kidney to Karim, and when her friend Rohan warns her that this is not her story to write, Emily asserts, 'No, No, it's mine. It's my story too' (Mukherjee, 2024, p.200). Salim's detailed narrative about his life may be interpreted as instance of 'parrhesia' (truth-telling) that Foucault associates with the tradition of care of the self and explains as 'speech that is equivalent to commitment, to a bond, and which establishes a certain pact between the subject of enunciation and the subject of conduct' (Foucault, 2005, p. 406). Emily is unable to understand or explain the bond that develops with Salim, and yet she is able to accept his story as her own, affirming a clear ethical direction of her care of the self by donating her kidney. The narrative at this point clearly portrays the extended configuration of the self-other paradigm that Foucault sees as the evolved application of the care of the self, transcending the classical prototype of master-disciple. The second section is the only one of the three sections of this novel that depicts successful resolution of care of the self: 'The final purpose of parrhesia is to free the person to whom one is speaking, so that this person can enter in his or her own relationship to truth and constitute him or herself as a true subject' (Anderson-Nicolet, 2012, p. 193). Emily discovers her freedom both as a writer and as a human being in coming closer to Salim and Karim.

The third section of the novel is centered around a poverty-stricken family in a remote village called Nonapani. In that poor household, Sabita receives a cow as a gift. She works as a domestic cook as her husband's income is not sufficient. But there is no security of her job, as absence for some days often causes the loss of the month's wages for her. She lost her first child when she had to leave him for her work. After the day's work, she does not have any energy left to cook for her little children, and there is not much to cook. Sabita's world is a dismal death-world as it is constantly threatened by death, disease, and struggle. Even amidst dire poverty, however, Sabita believes that 'a solution has to be found, and she is the one who has to find it' (Mukherjee, 2024, p.217). Sabita's fight is as much psychological as it is physical. She leaves no stone unturned to stabilize their economic condition. She is even forced to send

her little daughter, Mira, to work. When she receives the gift of the cow, she is baffled to procure provisions for her, and yet the care of the self is extended to her as he cares for the animal, as she consoles the cow Gauri, 'Nothing to fear, I'll look after you. You are one of us now' (Mukherjee, 2024, p.225). The way she manages her psychological crisis is nothing but effective 'care of the self' that reminds one of Foucault: 'The care of the self implies a certain way of attending to what we think and what takes place in our thought' (Foucault, 2005, p. 11). The emotional bonding among Sabita and her children Mira and Sahadeb, the way they stand by one another even amidst dire poverty prove the validity of Foucault's observation that the 'care of the self' embraces relationships that are diverse: 'These relationships can be familial, or involve a protective aspect, but they can also be a friendship bond between two persons of similar age, status and culture' (Foucault, 2012, p. 192). All her desperate efforts and prolonged struggle, however, prove ineffectual: 'Every episode in her life. Every turn of events brings her face-to-face with her own absolute helplessness. She has power over nothing, power to do nothing' (Mukherjee, 2024, p.285). Even for a brief period, however, Sabita is able to live happily when she manages to sell the milk. Ultimately, she is defeated as she fails to find enough buyers for the milk. Eventually, her husband Pulak decides to sell Gauri across the border. The dream of fifty thousand rupees prompts Pulak to make the decision without the knowledge of anyone else: 'He was tired, he wanted to be liberated from this life of his. He wanted to liberate his wife and daughter from the lives they had' (Mukherjee, 2024, p.305). Ultimately, however, he grows desperate and thinks about his own liberation: 'Freedom from being ground down to dust under the burden of responsibility, of the labour needed to provide for a family' (Mukherjee, 2024, p.306). Towards the end, some people catch him near the border, and he is brutally killed.

## Conclusion

The attempt of this paper has been to initiate a critical intervention of Foucauldian 'care of the self' in the understanding of the struggle and predicament of the individuals in the 'death-world' and explore the reflection of such intervention in Neel Mukherjee's *Choice*. Since Neel Mukherjee's *Choice* deals with the experiences of death-world of diverse characters (hailing from different parts of the globe and different class and gender), the 'care of the self' that these characters practice (since Foucauldian care insists on concrete practices) is also diverse and rich in possibilities. One of these practices is the association of 'care of the self' with care for others. Ayush's efforts to inculcate ethical concerns in the young children and his practice of an ethical life despite the socio-psychological obstacles that he constantly faces in his gay partnership with his economical partner Luke, the lifelong struggle of illegal refugees like Salim or the psychological struggle of survivors like Emily who is able to cure herself by coming in close contact with the lives of others or Pulak's initial reasons to sell Gauri to ensure the economic stability of his family and Sabita's perseverance are all classic instances of 'care of the self' that help the individuals to stay strong in the dismal death-world that they constantly face.

Question may be raised about the effectiveness of such care of the self and the related care of others, especially when one considers Ayush's final decision to relieve the pain of the pet retriever Spencer or Pulak's final decision to sell Gauri the cow to seek his own liberation from the burden of responsibilities. But the results of such individual decisions that are permeated with violence and death (a stark reminder of Mbembe's necropolitical death-worlds)

are all in one way or the other connected with 'care of the self' in its varied manifestations. Foucault has made it clear that the present culture of self is widely different from the ancient practices of which not all have disappeared (Foucault, 1982, p.251). When asked whether he was seeking to discover 'attractive and plausible alternative' in the ancient culture of self, Foucault instantly refuted: 'No! I am not looking for an alternative; you can't find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people' (Foucault, 1982, p.231). A close textual analysis of Mukherjee's novel reveals that surely not all aspects of the ancient culture of 'care of the self' have been lost. Foucault emphasized the importance of 'ethico-political choice' of our daily lives (Foucault, 1982, p. 232), and Mukherjee's novel exhibits the importance of choices and decisions that are inseparable parts of 'care of the self' and profoundly influence both the lives and deaths of the characters living in the death-worlds.

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