
When Law Becomes Violence: A Mbembean Reading of the Price of Survival and System-Made Criminality in The Prisoner**Asma Maqsood¹, Amina Abbas²**¹ BS English Scholar, UMT Sialkot.² English Lecturer, UMT Sialkot**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i2.2274>****Abstract**

This study analyzes how systemic violence works in Omar Shahid Hamid's *The Prisoner* (2013). This paper challenges the narrative that corruption arises from individual moral failure. It asserts that in the postcolonial system, criminality is not a choice but a requirement for survival. Utilizing Achille Mbembe's theoretical framework from *On the Postcolony*, specifically the concepts of Commandement, Conviviality, and Zombification, this paper examines how the indigenous state has recycled colonial tools of oppression to hunt its own people. The analysis demonstrates that the state functions through a "regime of exception," by weaponizing the law and forcing law enforcement into a convivial relationship with the criminal underworld. Through a close reading of the protagonists' trajectories, the study argues that "zombification," a state of moral paralysis, becomes the inevitable requirement for physical existence in the Postcolony. Ultimately, the study concludes that in a world where law and crime are indistinguishable, it is impossible to label the system as a failure or the individual as a criminal. In such system, there are no true heroes or villains, only survivors who must participate in the very system that oppresses them.

Keywords: The Prisoner, Achille Mbembe, Commandement, Conviviality, Zombification, Systemic Violence, Postcolonial State, Pakistani Anglophone Literature

Introduction

In the world of Omar Shahid Hamid's, *The Prisoner* (2013), the law does not protect the citizen, it hurts them. It presents a brutal reality where survival demands the death of human conscience. The novel is set in Karachi where the state machinery is designed not to prevent crime, but to mandate it. As the title of the novel suggests that in the Postcolony every citizen is imprisoned by the system. To label this setting merely as a "lawless frontier" is a misleading. The traditional theories, like those by Edward Said, focus on the external scars left by the colonial rule. They often fail to explain the internal decay of the independent states. They do not answer the terrifying question posed by Hamid's novel: why has the indigenous government turned into a predator that preys its own citizens?

To address this theoretical gap, this research applies Achille Mbembe's framework to argue that the systemic violence in *The Prisoner* is not an accidental, but the operating logic of the Postcolony. The novel demonstrates that the state exercises Commandement, which is a rule through violence and fear and forces the police and the underworld into a relationship of Conviviality. Consequently, the only path to survival for officers like Akbar Khan is Zombification that is the deliberate murder of one's own conscience. Thus, the novel proves that the postcolonial state is recycling colonial violence where law and crime are indistinguishable.

To investigate this argument, this study addresses the following two questions:

- How do the mechanisms of Commandement and Conviviality in *The Prisoner* erase the distinction between state law enforcement and law breaker?
- How system forces individuals into the psychological process of Zombification for the survival?

This paper aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine how the mechanisms of Commandement and Conviviality in *The Prisoner* erase the distinction between state law enforcement and criminality by enabling police, intelligence agencies, and the underworld to operate within the same regime of violence and exception.
- To analyze how the postcolonial system forces individuals into the psychological process of zombification, tracing the moral degradation of characters such as Akbar Khan, Dr. Death, and Constantine to demonstrate how criminality becomes necessary for survival.

This study is significant because it challenges the dominant narrative that corruption is due to moral failure of an individual. By applying Mbembe's lens, this research fills this gap in postcolonial studies. It doesn't talk about "Colonizer vs. Colonized" relationship but discuss "System vs. Subject" struggles. It explains why in the postcolonial system the only way to survive the law is to break it.

Literature Review

In the contemporary Pakistani Anglophone literature Omar Shahid Hamid is a key figure. His debut novel, *The Prisoner* (2013), has received significant popularity for its honest portrayal of the system of Pakistan. Existing research on this text has mostly focused on three main areas: the failure of the governance of state, the rise of religious extremism, and the urban violence. This review examines the existing research to identify the gap.

A large body of research analyses the novel as a commentary on political collapse. Farooq, Ahmad, and Rahman (2021) place the text within the context of "State Failure". They argue that Pakistan functions as a vacuum in which the absence of the law allows non-state actors to assume sovereignty. Building on this, Khalid and Hussain (2025) investigate the economic causes behind this failure and proposes that the violence in Karachi is a result of neoliberal policies that have exacerbated class divisions. Although these studies correctly capture political environment of fear and instability, they portray police simply as "failure" and neglect how individual survives in this environment.

Another portion of criticism focuses on the novel's engagement with religious ideology and terror. Rafique and Ashraf (2024) explore the construct of the "Fundamentalist," and show how Hamid challenges Western stereotypes by presenting terrorists who manipulate Islam for political interests. Similarly, Hussain et al. (2025) analyze "Negative Religious Identities," examine tensions between extremist ideologies and the secular public sphere. These studies challenge western stereotypes but their focus on religious ideology overshadow bureaucratic corruption. As for officers like Constantine and Akbar, the issue is not theological, but institutional.

The study that is most close to this research is of Ansar et al. (2025). Using an "Anarchist" lens, he argues that the characters in *Prisoner* exist in a space where distinction between state power and street power has been blurred. Also, Ahmed (n.d.) applied the concept of "Necropolitics" (the politics of death) to argue that Karachi functions as a space of Necropolitics, where the state and criminal gangs compete for the sovereign right to determine who lives and who dies. Although Ahmed's work explains how the system destroys life, it doesn't address how system forces subjects to maintain life through corruption.

To fully examine the violence and survival, it is necessary to move beyond the criticism of Hamid's work and engage with broader theoretical shifts in postcolonial studies. The internal dynamics of the independent nation-state are exemplified by Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (2001). In this framework, Mbembe

has shifted from Foucault's "biopolitics" to

"Necropolitics". The critics like Judith Butler and Paul Gilroy has used the Mbembe concept of Commandement to explain dictatorial regimes of Africa. However, there is notable lack of research that applies Mbembe's concepts of "Commandement" "Zombification" and "conviviality" to the South Asian novels.

This research uses this conceptual framework. Existing research does talk about Necropolitics and state failure. But there is a theoretical silence regarding the relationship between the law and the criminal in South Asian literature. No scholar has yet applied Mbembe's concepts of

"Conviviality" and "Mutual Zombification" to *The Prisoner*. This research fills that gap. It argues that corruption in the novel is not a "failure" of the individuals. It is a requirement for existence.

Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative, interpretive methodology. The primary source of data is the text of Omar Shahid Hamid's novel, *The Prisoner* (2013). And the theoretical framework is derived from Achille Mbembe's seminal work, *On the Postcolony*. This research specifically applies the concepts of Commandement (state sovereignty), Conviviality (intimacy of power), and Mutual Zombification (loss of agency). The analytical method involves a close textual reading of the novel. It examines narrative developments, dialogues, and character trajectories especially those of Akbar Khan and Superintendent Constantine. Secondary sources, includes academic articles on postcolonial theory and South Asian sociopolitics.

Theoretical Framework

To clearly understand the systemic violence in the *Prisoner*, we need to move beyond traditional postcolonial theories that just focus on the historical event of colonization. The Theories by theorist like Edward Said or Homi K. Bhabha focuses on the relationship between the Colonizer (the Empire/West) and the Colonized (the native/East). These theories largely revolve around the themes of power, representation, cultural domination, and identity politics. However, contemporary society faces many new problems such as how systems of power, violence, and corruption continue to operate long after independence in colonial rule.

This research utilizes Achille Mbembe's seminal text, *On the Postcolony* (2001). Although Mbembe writes in context of the African experience, his views strongly resonate to South Asia. In modern post-colonies like Pakistan, the colonial machinery of power has been inherited by the local ruling class. The violence in the Karachi in the novel is not a remnant of the past. It is an active, living example of what Mbembe describes as a regime where the violence of the colonial state has been "indigenized". Now the tools of oppression and violence, once used by colonial masters are now employed by local elite against their own citizens.

According to Mbembe "Postcolony" is not a simply a time period following independence. It is a specific space of "entanglement" where order and chaos are mixed. It is a state marked by a lack of restraint. The postcolonial state does not simply inherit colonial institutions. It reproduces and reshapes them into a system that normalizes corruption and violence. According to Mbembe: "The Postcolony is characterized by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and lack of proportion, as well as by distinctive ways identities are multiplied, transformed, and put into circulation" (Mbembe, 2001, p. 102).

In *prisoner*, the Karachi acts as the ultimate "Postcolony." This space is not defined by the quiet, orderly application of law, but by "political improvisation". Rules are made and broken arbitrarily to maintain control. Thus, creating environment of "excess" and lack of restraint.

Mbembe's concept of Commandement explains the type of power exercised by the Government and the State machinery in the novel. Commandement is a form of the authoritarian power. It doesn't govern

through law but through force, fear and coercion. It produces a political environment where State possesses a “right to be arbitrary.” As in the democracy the government is subject to the law, the Commandement is the law itself. Mbembe explains “Commandement was based on a régime deception—that is, a regime that departed from the common law... The lack of justice of the means, and the lack of legitimacy of the ends, conspired to allow an arbitrariness and intrinsic unconditionality that may be said to have been the distinctive feature of colonial sovereignty” (Mbembe, 2001, pp. 26, 29).

In *The Prisoner*, the State operates with this unconditional authority, and demands unconditional obedience through force. This concept explains why in the novel the characters feel crushed by the system. Because they are fighting against a power that recognizes no limits and legitimizes its own violence.

Mbembe further argues that the relationship between the ruler and the ruled in postcolony is not just of simple resistance. He labels this relationship as conviviality. They are not clearly distinguished as oppressor and oppressed, but they coexist in same space. Ordinary individuals participate in the very structures that exploit them because their survival depends on compliance.

Mbembe writes: “The postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration but can best be characterized as convivial, a relationship fraught by the fact of the commandement and its ‘subjects’ having to share the same living space” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 104).

It suggests that in the postcolony, enemies such as the police and the criminals in the novel share same jokes, language, and logic. It is a system where participating in violence and corruption becomes the very condition of survival.

Finally, this shared existence leads to zombification. This is a metaphor for the moral and psychological paralysis produced by systemic power. It is a state where subjects recognize violence and injustice. But they continue to participate in them because non-participation not an option. It is a state of “living death” where subjects become hollow from inside, or a “zombie.” Zombie functions mechanically within the system to survive but stripped of the capacity to choose right from wrong. Mbembe states: “This logic... has resulted in the mutual

‘zombification’ of both the dominant and those apparently dominated. This zombification means that each has robbed the other of vitality and left both impotent” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 104)

In the novel, characters like Dr. Death or Constantine are not naturally corrupt, but they have been zombified by the Commandement that has drained them of their vitality.

Using Mbembe’s framework, this research argues that the corruption in *The Prisoner* is not merely an individual fault, but an inevitable outcome of structural violence in the Postcolony. The novel illustrates a world where the indigenous state exercises Commandement to rule through arbitrary violence. Consequently, the citizens and officers are trapped in a Convivial relationship with this tyranny, leading to their mutual Zombification. Ultimately, Mbembe reveals that the characters in the *Prisoner* are not simply “bad apples” but the victims of system that transfers survival into complicity.

Analysis

In Omar Shahid Hamid’s *The Prisoner* (2013), corruption is the operating system of the state itself. And it is not just an individual flaw. Karachi, in the novel, cannot be just called as a part of “failed state” or a “lawless zone.” Instead, the city is the best example of Achille Mbembe’s “Postcolony”. Postcolony is an authoritarian regime which is ruled as “regime of exception.” In this world, the system does not simply ignore the law. It also rewrites its own laws through violence, force and arbitrariness. As in the novel, the brutality carried out by the United Front (UF) and the Intelligence Agencies is not just violation of law, it is what Mbembe called as

Commandement. This system forces the police and the underworld into the relationship of Conviviality. It is a shared space where the difference between the law enforcer and the lawbreaker disappears. Consequently, the only path remains for officers like Constantine and Akbar Khan is “zombification,” which is the

destruction and silencing of moral agency and consciences to survive. By analyzing the novel through Mbembe's theoretical lens, it becomes clear that in the postcolonial state, the only way to endure the system is to surrender one's self to it.

In the novel, the United Front (a political party) and the Intelligence Agencies exercise Commandement. It is a form of colonial rule. It operates above the law and demand unconditional obedience. They are not public servants. They operate as absolute authorities. Their power is not derived from law but from the fear of causing harm. As Constantine describes their rule: "When the UF first came to power, it was as if a mafia had taken over the city. Their rule was absolute.

They crushed anyone who stood in their way" (Hamid, 2015, p. 26). This is evident when Akbar Khan tries to enforce the law against a ward boss of the UF. Akbar arrests a UF ward boss for kidnapping children and demanding a huge ransom, which is a complete violation of the law. He describes the arrest as follows: "I took the... ward boss and dragged him by his hair... I locked him up" (Hamid, 2015, p. 34). However, instead of receiving praise, Akbar faces immediate suspension, which his superior officer, the DSP, was "more than happy to do" (Hamid, 2015, p. 34).

This incident proves that in the Postcolony, the law exists not to protect the common citizen but to protect the party and the elite. The suspension acts as a disciplinary tool by the Commandement. It signals that any resistance against the party will be met with severe punishment. However, when Akbar refuses to commit to the system and he continues to resist the Commandement, the system destroys him. Akbar challenges the authority of the party, he arrests several United Front party workers who were terrorizing the city. The system destroys him by fabricating over fifty false FIRs against him and accusing him of everything from corruption to murder. As Akbar notes, "They accused me of killing people I had never even met... The beauty of the system is that if they want to get you, they can get you for anything" (Hamid, 2015, p. 45). This illustrates what Mbembe calls the "arbitrariness" of power. In the Postcolony, the law is not a tool for justice but a weapon used to discipline subjects. Thus, Akbar's life imprisonment for crimes he did not commit proves that in this regime, murder is forgivable, but rebellion is not.

In this novel, the intelligence agencies represent "Deep State". They decide who is a "criminal" and who is a "patriot". Colonel Tarkeen and the Agencies initially use Akbar to fulfil their agenda. They grant him unchecked power to eliminate the state's enemies. However, the moment Akbar deviates even slightly from their script and question them. They withdraw their protection and declare him a threat. For the Agencies, officers are like instruments which are meant to handle the state's "filth." Akbar shouts as he realizes this truth: "You people use words like 'honor' and 'country' to get people to do what you want them to do, then throw them away like a used condom! I'm one of your condoms too!" (Hamid, 2015, p. 23). This metaphor of the "condom" captures the essence of what is the value of an individual in the Postcolony. They are subject. They have no rights. They exist as long as they are obedient. And they are discarded the moment they try to deviate.

Similarly, just as the system punishes the rebellion of Akbar, it rewards officers like Maqsood Mahr because they never question the system. Maqsood is the ideal subject of the

Commandement. He is incompetent, corrupt, and totally obedient. As the narrator notes, "the measure of Maqsood Mahr's success was that the incumbency board that hung behind his desk carried only one name on it" (Hamid, 2015, p. 48). Maqsood's longevity is a result of his complicity in an instable department. He survives by serving the ruling elite. He obeys illegal orders of the party without question. The contrast between Akbar's life imprisonment and Maqsood's rapid promotion provides evidence for the novel's thesis that the system is not broken it works through this violence and lawlessness.

This Commandement naturally breeds Conviviality, which is a condition Mbembe describes as the "intimacy of tyranny." In this space, the ruler and the ruled share the same living space, language, and logic. In the Postcolony, they are not enemies. They are co-dependent partners in the same ecosystem. This is visible when Constantine visits the Home Minister, known as

“Pakora,” to talk about his promotion. He finds Ateeq Tension, a “mad dog” murderer and terrorist, who was sitting comfortably in the minister’s office as a chief advisor. Constantine describes it: “By the deference Pakora showed Tension, it was clear that in the party hierarchy, the street thug outranked the minister” (Hamid, 2015, p. 129). The Home Minister, who is legally responsible for the safety of the city. He bows to the hitman because the political power of the United Front relies on the violence that Tension provides. Later, Pakora admits his helplessness to

Constantine, stating, “I’ll deal with him in due course, but I can’t move against him just yet”

(Hamid, 2015, p. 130). Here the “ruler” and the “criminal” are in a convivial relationship. The ruler depends on the gangster to maintain power, and the gangster relies on the politician for legitimacy.

One form of this Conviviality is the “simulacrum.” It is a world where characters pretend to be someone, they know to be false. This is evident in the relationship between Constantine and the corrupt Maqsood Mahr. Constantine knows that Maqsood is incompetent and “concocted a false case” against Akbar. Maqsood is also aware that everyone knows his ill deeds. But in official meetings, Maqsood pretends to be a respected officer, and Constantine pretends to respect him.

Even though both know it is a lie. This is the theater of the Postcolony, where everyone is acting. And everyone knows that it is wrong but they do so because the system demands.

The relationship between Akbar Khan and the jihadi leader, Sheikh Noman, is the perfect demonstration of this convivial relationship. In a lawful system, these two men would be mortal enemies, but in the convivial space of Karachi, they are partners. Akbar knows that the pious

“Sheikh” Noman is actually “Nomi,” a former “small-time cheater” and “whisky-guzzling” fraud hiding behind the façade of religion (“din and duniya”) (Hamid, 2015, p. 218). However, Akbar does not expose him. Instead, they engage in dialogues, and Akbar uses Noman’s influence to recover the kidnapped American journalist, which is necessary to secure Akbar’s own release from prison (Hamid, 2015, pp. 260–261). As Mbembe’s concept that “official” power and “unofficial” power share the same logic illustrates, Akbar admits, “I had to become an insider in the jihadi groups... I pretended to become one of their ‘sheikhs’” (Hamid, 2015, p. 267). In the Postcolony, the “hero” cop and the “terrorist” sheikh are not opposites; they are operators of the same violent system. They have to trade favors and information to ensure their survival in a system that would otherwise destroy them both.

Thus, the overwhelming pressure of Commandement and the inescapable intimacy of

Conviviality led to “zombification,” which is the psychological and moral death of the subject. It is the process by which the system drains a person of their agency and compels them to participate in the very system they hate just to survive, which Mbembe calls the loss of “vitality.” The tragedy of *The Prisoner* is not the physical violence, but this moral suicide.

Constantine is the perfect example of a zombified subject. In one of the most painful sequences, an old man comes to the police station weeping because his daughter has been raped by men connected to the ruling party. Constantine knows exactly who the predators are and where it happened, as he describes: “The old man sat in front of me on the station floor all day, crying and begging us to go with him, to try and save his daughter from getting gang-raped. We even knew which room of which building they were fucking her in. But none of us did anything because they were in power... We sat here like a bunch of cockles hijras!” (Hamid, 2015, p. 30). He compares them to hijras (impotent eunuchs) because he has been castrated by the fear of the system. He confesses, “Our duty is to obey the ruling party, not the law” (Hamid, 2015, p. 31). He is forced to be passive and become complicit in the rape through his silence. He takes bribes from brothels not out of greed, but because he has surrendered to his status as a zombie. He describes it as: “I cannot deny that I have taken money from people. But I do it because I want to survive in this world... In our country, sahib, it is the system that makes the individual bad” (Hamid, 2015, p. 115). He is physically alive, but morally dead.

Even in the end, the man of principle, the Inspector General known as “Dr. Death,” is eventually zombified.

He is called Dr. Death because he is a man of iron principles who fears no one.

However, when the system threatens Dr. Death, he betrays Akbar, whom he considers his “Spiritual son.” He confesses in front of Akbar, “I am sorry, Akbar. I truly am... But I have my own son... I don’t want my son to see me from behind iron bars” (Hamid, 2015, p. 116). This moment marks the complete zombification of the novel’s strongest figure. The “Man of Principle” dies, replaced by a compromised, frightened father who must kneel before the system. It proves that in the Postcolony, morality is a luxury that no one can afford, and the system eventually turns everyone into hollow instruments of its own will.

However, the protagonist, Akbar Khan, embodies the final and most complete transformation. Throughout the novel, Akbar fights the system, resists the Agencies, and defies the UF. But how does the novel conclude? How does Akbar finally achieve his freedom? He does not win in court. He does not prove his innocence. He wins by becoming a zombie. He negotiates with frauds like Nomi and bribes Pakora with the money he has taken from Maqsood by threatening him. As he notes: “Fifty petis... That was the price I had to pay Pakora... Now, it’s in his interest to protect me because I’m now his sone ki chidiya [golden bird]” (Hamid, 2015, p. 262). Akbar defeats the system only by becoming the part of the very system he once used to despise. He buys his freedom with stolen money. Now he is not an idealist who dragged the kidnapper by the hair; he is zombified, understanding that honor leads to death, while compromise guarantees safety.

In conclusion, *The Prisoner* serves as a sociological critique. Through the theoretical lens of Achille Mbembe, it becomes clear that the corruption in Karachi is not accidental, it is the force that keeps the system running. Commandement, as exercised by the United Front and the Intelligence Agencies, acts as a new colonial power that subjugates its own citizens through violence and fear. This leads to Conviviality, where lawbreakers and law enforcers share the same space by making partnerships, erasing the line between the police station and the prison. Thus, the only way for characters like Constantine, Dr. Death, and Akbar to navigate this system is by committing to zombification. They are forced to amputate their own morals to ensure survival. Omar Shahid Hamid’s novel ultimately argues that in a Postcolony, the only way to beat the game is to participate in it

Conclusion

This research has undertaken a forensic examination of Omar Shahid Hamid’s *The Prisoner*. This study doesn’t only discuss this novel as crime thriller. It provides a deeper critique of power, violence, and survival. By applying the theoretical lens of Achille Mbembe, the study has challenged the simplistic explanation of “corruption” as an individual moral failing. Instead, it argues that the violence in Karachi is the result of a consciously constructed system that does not only tolerate criminality but requires it as a condition for survival. The analysis of

Commandement has revealed that the state in the novel operates not through the rule of law, but through a “regime of exception. In regime of exception, the law is not a shield for the citizen but a sword in the hands of the elite that is used to enforce unconditional obedience. Furthermore, the investigation of Conviviality has exposed that the distinctions between the “Law” and the “Outlaw” has been dissolved. The novel depicts a convivial partnership where the “official” and “unofficial” powers negotiate the management of violence together. This ultimately leads to the central tragedy of the novel which is the process of Zombification. This is how the system strips the protagonists of their moral agency and survival is only achieved at the cost of death of moral conscious. In conclusion, *The Prisoner* portrays the “state” as a predatory machine that functions by turning honest men into monsters. The novel ultimately argues that in a state governed by the logic of Commandement and Conviviality, there are no heroes or villains but only survivors.

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