



A Review of *Dying for Freedom: Political Martyrdom in South Africa* by Jacob Dlamini (Polity Press, 2024).

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Dlamini's latest book delivers an incisive review of necropolitics in the history of South Africa's political life. According to Achille Mbembe (Necropolitics 2019), necropolitics is the use of both political and social power to dictate how one must live and how one must die. The history of South African politics evinces how dying for freedom was considered the pinnacle of heroism. Championed by the ideas of political activists like Nelson Mandela and Steve Biko, political deaths during apartheid were interpreted as one's passport to a heroic legacy, an experience one had to look forward to. Following this, it is clear why Dlamini decides to explore necropolitics through the notion of political martyrdom in critiquing South Africa's racialised perspective of the sacrifices made by most South Africans during apartheid. In the light of the failure of most South Africans to follow the ways in which they were expected to live and to die, they found themselves stripped of their heroic legacy and some stifled into oblivion as discussed in Dlamini's book.

In addition, Dlamini exposes the ‘masculine aspect’ that informed how political deaths were to be acknowledged during and after apartheid. In other words, he exposes how, besides the masses, some political activists fought to satisfy their male egos, which resulted in a lack of recognition towards the contributions made by female activists. As a result, the idea of a notable political death has led to the erasure of certain apartheid victims, particularly women, who also sacrificed their lives for South African freedom. For example, the book discusses the unpopularising of Phila Portia Ndwandwe’s martyrdom, who, as a female comrade died at the hands of the apartheid security police. Dlamini offers insight on a racialised masculinisation of death through the lack of acknowledgment as a member of the Ndwandwe family and for the role she played in the struggle, which emphasizes how measures of dignity of one’s liberation sacrifices are made in gendered terms. Also, the book explores how concealing the names of some comrades elevates them to the position of unmournable bodies, alongside those who were accused of being accomplices to the oppressive system, such as double agents or apartheid informants. Overall, Dlamini argues that such omissions stifle the spirit of the struggle by revoking the very dignity for which the marginalized fought and died.

Drawing from the book of ‘Revelations’ in the Bible, chapter one portrays martyrdom as an act of witnessing, and Dlamini uses this definition to establish a stunning relation between Mandela’s martyrdom and masculinity. In short, Dlamini debunks opinions that Mandela and Biko became witnesses for the anti-apartheid movement out of a desire for the restoration of their manhood and dignity, and that death was the ultimate proof of their masculinity. Yet Dlamini also exposes how Mandela was one of the earliest culprits to politicise death by instrumentalizing death as a negotiating tool in return for the restoration of South Africans’ dignity. Dlamini argues that Mandela’s attitude attached value to death, prompting a reconsideration of how people died as a measure of the dignity gained through their deaths. The following chapter turns its attention to Steve Biko’s attitude toward death, and Dlamini reveals a masculine, aggressive and intellectual response to racial strife. The chapter accentuates how Biko’s courageous philosophy enabled him to strip

oppressors of the powers of life and death. In one of the interviews noted in the book, Biko actually challenged a security guard ‘to kill him or fight him like a man’. Though his attitude eventually led to his death, it established standards upon which political martyrdom would be evaluated in South African politics.

Concomitantly, the discussion of Justice Mafa Ngidi, an ANC leader who escaped from police custody in July 1984, exposes the flaws in the ANC’s politicisation of what the dignity of martyrdom entails. For the ANC, martyrdom –not one’s life – becomes the pinnacle of political accomplishment. Ngidi’s unwillingness to die for the cause, and his so-called lack of masculine dignity fueled the ANC’s belief that he was a double agent and sparked a manhunt. Chapter four further expatiates on how the ANC’s standardising and politicising of martyrdom resulted in the non-acknowledgement of other deaths, making some deaths more mournable than others. Here Dlamini unpacks the complex case of The Sharpville Mayor, Khuzwayo Jacob Dlamini. Serving as a major of an apartheid state not only made him unpopular in life, but also led to an unacknowledged legacy in death. Dlamini argues that one’s collaboration with apartheid did not mean they were agents of the state but should also be acknowledged as political dissidents.

Dying for Freedom proposes a new approach to South African martyrdom and the notion of sacrifice by emphasising the importance of all lives lost during the struggle. According to Dlamini, all black South Africans, whether activists or non-activists and, even those that were labeled double agents, suffered the harshness of apartheid. Therefore, it is for this reason that their suffering should be acknowledged as a sacrifice of their well-being. The book unveils how all lives should be viewed as important and deserving of mourning. In many ways it dethrones the ANC’s politicisation of deaths by celebrating all lives that were given and taken during apartheid. The book propounds a more humane approach towards the families and friends of those who sacrificed their lives during apartheid, by advocating for the restoration of their dignity and the kind of acknowledgment that all lives deserve.