

EXPLORING NECROPOLITICS IN TEMSULA AO'S LABURNUM

FOR MY HEAD

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Abstract

This article examines the manifestation of necropolitics in Northeast India through a critical analysis of Temsula Ao's short story collection "Laburnum for My Head." Focusing primarily on the stories "Sonny", "The Letter," and "A Simple Question", the study explores how Ao's narratives illuminate the complex interplay of power, violence, and survival in a region marked by prolonged conflict and political instability. Drawing on theoretical frameworks established by Michel Foucault, Achille Mbembe, and Giorgio Agamben, the article argues that necropolitics in this context extends beyond the binary of state versus resistance, permeating multiple layers of society. Ao's stories reveal how the power over life and death is contested and exercised by various actors, including state forces, insurgent groups, and even ordinary villagers. It aims to shed light on the complex relationship between sovereignty, violence, and the production of marginalized populations in contemporary political landscapes.

Keywords: Violence, AFSPA, Necropolitics, sovereignty, resistance

One of the fundamental underpinnings of sovereignty resides in its capacity to exert control over life and death. As a pivotal instrument for regulating societal order and effectuating or impeding social change, sovereignty necessitates a state apparatus capable of governing the existential parameters of human existence. In this nexus of politics and ontology, power is not merely deployed to inflict violence but also to legitimize it, thereby establishing a framework for state-sanctioned control over life and death. Michel Foucault's seminal work *The History of Sexuality* (1978) introduces the concept of biopolitics, elucidating the integration of biological life into the political domain. Foucault posits that modern states exercise power through the meticulous regulation of bodies and populations, prioritizing the administration of life rather than its termination. This governance extends beyond mere survival, encompassing the optimization and control of life processes, rendering the population a central object of political strategy. Expanding upon Foucault's

framework, Achille Mbembe develops the notion of necropolitics, arguing that sovereignty is intrinsically linked to the power to determine who lives and who dies. Mbembe contends that “To be sovereign is to exert one’s control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.” (Mbembe 66). Necropolitics extends biopolitics by foregrounding the manner in which power is employed to create death-worlds—environments characterized by extreme deprivation and a precarious existence. These death-worlds are engendered by systemic violence, oppression, and the denial of fundamental human rights, disproportionately affecting marginalized and subjugated populations.

Northeast India has been a crucible of protracted armed conflict, deeply rooted ethnic tensions, and pervasive violence perpetrated by both state and non-state actors. Comprising eight states, the region has grappled with longstanding demands for autonomy and self-determination, often manifesting in violent confrontations. The region’s complex ethno-political landscape, characterized by diverse ethnic groups competing for recognition, resources, and political power, has been exacerbated by historical grievances and colonial legacies. These factors have contributed to a pervasive sense of marginalization and fuelled insurgencies and demands for statehood. As Sanjib Baruah argues, this volatile environment has transformed violence into a primary mode of political expression and negotiation (Baruah89).

The response by the Indian government to the challenges of insurgency has been laden with a heavy-handed approach, deploying military and paramilitary forces to quell insurgencies. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) which was first enforced in 1958 has been a focal point of contention, with scholars and critics alike arguing that it creates a climate of impunity, exacerbating human rights abuses and alienating the local population (Kikon 2019; Subir 2021; Bhattacharya 2018). While the region has also witnessed the rise of numerous insurgent groups, often with deep roots in specific ethnic communities. The interplay between state and non-state violence has produced a cyclical pattern of conflict, as state repression often fuels further resistance. Groups such as the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) exemplify this dynamic, having waged protracted armed struggles for sovereignty or autonomy. The impunity AFSPA allows has virtually created states of exceptions in the contested zones, violations ranging from abuse of human rights to rape and executions of the supposed insurgents. As Sanjoy Hazarika argues:

There is virtually no legal redress in these laws because no courts of law have any right

to take up any case, even against civilian personnel, unless express permission is granted by those authorized—in other words, usually by the persons who should be held accountable for the act(s) of commission or omission. (Hazarika, 7-8)

The socio-economic consequences of this enduring violence have been devastating. Protracted conflicts have disrupted economic activities, displaced populations, and strained the region's infrastructure. Moreover, the pervasive insecurity has hindered efforts to integrate the Northeast into the broader Indian polity, reinforcing a sense of isolation and neglect. Ao's stories thus are set in the backdrop of this environment, her narratives are not centred on the aspects of law and its ethical quarries but of the state such environment creates. Her stories are in its core a narrative of survival in the face of conflict and gender dynamics particularly of the Ao tribe of Nagaland.

Laburnum for My Head offers a kaleidoscopic lens into the complexities of Northeast India. Her work, deeply rooted in the region's history and culture, provides a valuable insight into the lives of its inhabitants, particularly women, and the impact of conflict on their existence. Ao's stories offers a perspective of the aspect of lives under constant threat of violence and change. Ao begins with a poetic description of the purpose of her stories, she opts for a confessional mode of narrative that is at once intimate and universal: "Stories live in every heart; some get told, many others remain unheard— stories about individual experiences made universal by imagination; stories that are jokes, and sometimes prayers; and those that are not always a figment of the mind but are, at times, confessions." The tension Ao identifies between stories as "figment of the mind" and as reflections of reality resonates a polyphonic mode of narration, this dialectic where the fictional narrative is deeply rooted in the historical realities of the Naga conflict, seamlessly blurs the lines between imagination and lived experience of the Ao community.

The stories Ao presents are to be read keeping in mind the backdrop of a violent milieu, as the characters inextricably has to navigate the mechanism of the conflict. Necropolitics from this context exists as a marginal space of control and totality, and for necro politics to take effect, the self, the community and the oppositional force must be totalised first, into a bare life of statistics and into disposable lives.

Sonny explores the complexities of freedom fighters with mortality while simultaneously offering a nuanced perspective on the functionalities of necropolitics within a resistance movement. The story is told entirely from the perspective of the first-person narrator, who is Sonny's former lover. The narrator recounts her personal history with Sonny, including their courtship, his

commitment to the nationalist movement, and ultimately, his assassination. The narrative highlights how the narrator grapples with Sonny's transformation into a revered martyr within the context of the nationalist struggle. Ao depicts a world where death is an omnipresent reality for those engaged in the struggle for freedom. This constant proximity to mortality creates a unique existential condition, as evidenced by the narrator's observation of "bitter and violent rivalries among the different groups of freedom-fighters which often resulted in senseless deaths of leaders and cadres alike" (Ao 88). This environment of perpetual danger necessitates a continuous confrontation with one's own mortality, shaping the psychological landscape of those involved in the resistance. Death, in this way, becomes a performative agency that shapes the existence of Sonny and the speaker.

Sonny, who is affectionately referred to as a "dream-chaser" by the speaker, is a revolutionary compared to Che Guevara and is ultimately put to death in a similar manner. Sonny's ideological affiliation is what Ernest Becker, in *The Denial of Death*, refers to as Heroic living. Citing Nathaniel Shaler, Becker states:

"Heroism is first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death" (ch. 2).

Human beings, he argues, are fundamentally driven by a fear of their own mortality, and much of human behaviour and culture can be understood as an attempt to deny or transcend this existential reality. For Becker, the intrinsic nature of humans is to create symbolic extensions of the self that outlive physical death—this is exemplified in the way Sonny's death is transformed into a form of martyrdom. The narrator observes how, prior to Sonny's assassination, he virtually became a "hero and intellectual 'guru' to the younger generation of sympathizers," with his "ideology" and "legacy" imbued with transcendent significance. This essentially creates a site for rivalry between the senior leaders of the movement, as the speaker mentions Sonny "by questioning their ideology and actions in public even before he went 'underground'" (Ao 91-92).

This site is particularly relevant when considering Mbembe's analysis of martyrdom within the framework of necropolitics. Mbembe notes that the logic of martyrdom is a potent political act where the individual's death is transformed into a form of resistance. Mbembe suggests:

"The body in itself has neither power nor value. Rather its power and value result from a process of abstraction based on the desire for eternity. In that sense, the martyr, having established a moment of supremacy in which the subject overcomes his own mortality, can be seen as laboring under the sign of the future. In other words, in death, the future is collapsed into the present" (Mbembe 89).

Sonny's apprehension and gradual disillusionment of the movement is further complicated when in an act of self-sacrifice Sonny testifies "about the true state of the movement" which he wanted the speaker publish by any means. This internal power struggles within the resistance movement reveal that necro politics transcends the binary of state versus resistance, permeating the very structures ostensibly fighting against oppression. These internecine conflicts demonstrate how the power over life and death can be wielded by various factions within a supposedly unified cause. The ideological justifications for violence among different groups illustrate how necro politics can be rationalized even within movements purportedly fighting for freedom, with each faction asserting the right to determine who lives or dies based on their interpretation of the cause. Sonny's assassination, allegedly by the "J group," shows the potential for betrayal and disillusionment within resistance movements. This act exemplifies how necropolitical power can be directed inward, with freedom fighters becoming both agents and victims of political violence. The expendability of lives within the movement is suggested by the phrase "senseless deaths of leaders and cadres alike," reflecting a necropolitical calculus where individual lives are weighed against ideological objectives. The story implies a hierarchy in the perception of deaths, with leaders' demises, such as Sonny's, garnering more attention and potentially having greater political impact than those of rank-and-file members. This stratification of deaths within the movement itself reflects the complex power dynamics at play in necropolitical spaces.

The ongoing conflicts and fatalities within the resistance movement points to a sense of normalization of violence, where the right to kill becomes an accepted component of political struggle. This normalization blurs the lines between oppressor and oppressed, complicating the traditional necropolitical narrative and demonstrating how the power over life and death can be distributed across various actors within a contested political landscape. Through Sonny's story, the personal cost of engaging in resistance becomes apparent. The constant proximity to death profoundly affects personal relationships, as witnessed by Sonny's separation from the narrator.

The letter presents another nuanced state where the underground extortionists embody a clear example of necropolitical power. The story is set in a secluded Naga village, caught between government forces and underground insurgents. After completing a road construction project, villagers are robbed of their wages by armed extortionists claiming to represent the underground. One villager pleads to keep money for his son's exam fees but is beaten. Resentment builds among the villagers, leading to a decision to resist future extortion. Later, when another armed man arrives

demanding "taxes," the villagers surround and beat him severely. A group led by a man called Long Legs takes the unconscious extortionist to a cliff and throws him off, along with his gun. Before disposing of the body, Long Legs finds a letter in the man's pocket from his son, asking for exam fees. Long Legs burns the letter but is haunted by this knowledge for the rest of his life.

Violence here permeates much of the aspect of life in the village, serving as a lingua franca for all parties involved. From the extortion by underground groups to the implicit threat of army reprisals, and ultimately the villagers' own violent resistance, the story demonstrates how violence becomes normalized as a means of asserting power and control in a conflict zone. The villagers' decision to kill the extortionist is a complex manifestation of power dynamics that goes beyond a simple appropriation of necropolitical power by the powerless. Their actions exist in a grey area that challenges straightforward categorizations of power and powerlessness.

It is crucial to recognize that the villagers are not entirely powerless to begin with. They possess a form of collective power rooted in their community bonds, local knowledge, and their role as producers (as evidenced by their ability to negotiate with the Border Roads Organization). Their decision to resist extortion stems from this existing, albeit limited, power base. The act of killing the extortionist is not a clear-cut example of necropolitics in the way that state or insurgent violence might be. Instead, it represents a desperate attempt to assert agency in a context where normal channels of justice and protection have broken down. The villagers are not systematically deciding who lives and who dies as part of a broader political strategy which would be more aligned with necropolitics as Mbembe conceives it. Rather, their action is a localized, reactive response to immediate threats. Moreover, the emotional and moral weight of their decision, as exemplified by Long Legs' lifelong guilt over the letter, suggests that this is not a comfortable assumption of necropolitical power. Unlike the armed forces and the insurgents, the villagers do not view themselves as arbiters of life and death, but as individuals pushed to extreme actions by extreme circumstances.

However, this act of resistance ultimately entangles them further in the web of violence and moral compromise that characterizes their environment. Their attempt to escape subjugation ironically leads them to engage in a form of it, highlighting the insidious nature of pervasive violence in eroding moral boundaries. Their resistance reflects a tragic illustration of how ordinary people can become implicated in cycles of violence when caught between competing necropolitical forces. Their story underscores the complex moral terrain navigated by those living in states of exception,

where the lines between resistance, survival, and complicity become blurred. Their actions reveal both the possibilities and the limitations of resistance in such contexts, and the profound ethical dilemmas faced by those caught in the crossfire of larger political conflicts. Their ability to demand "taxes" from the villagers under threat of violence demonstrates their control over the villagers' means of survival. The incident where a villager is assaulted for pleading to keep money for his son's examination fees underscores how these forces can arbitrarily decide who deserves to thrive and who must suffer.

The Indian government and army also exercise necropolitical control, albeit more subtly. The villagers' need to negotiate with the Border Roads Organization for work opportunities reveals their dependence on state structures for economic survival. Additionally, the mention of past experiences in "grouping zones" and army beatings during the insurgency highlights the state's historical power to determine the conditions of life and death for the Naga people. Reminiscent of a similar management by the United States during the Vietnam War, namely the Strategic Hamlet Program during 1960s. Incidentally, both failed to create a manageable asset and in turn led to a more divisive and further alienated the rural population from the government.

The village's decision to resist both underground and government forces represent an attempt to reclaim agency in the face of necropolitical pressures. However, this resistance ultimately leads to another manifestation of necropolitics when the villagers themselves decide to kill the lone extortionist. In this act, they temporarily assume the power to determine life and death, mirroring the very forces they seek to oppose.

The story's tragic conclusion, where Long Legs realizes they have killed a man whose son needed exam fees—echoing the earlier incident that sparked their resistance—creates a poignant illustration of how necropolitics can perpetuate cycles of violence and suffering. The villagers, in their attempt to escape the necropolitical control exerted over them, inadvertently become agents of that same system.

Similarly, in *A Simple Question* The villagers inhabit a profoundly precarious state, caught in the crossfire between the Naga underground forces and the Indian government. This precarity exemplifies what Giorgio Agamben's terms "bare life", where normal legal and social protections are suspended, and individuals are reduced to a form of life that is stripped of political rights and reduced to mere biological existence, often under conditions of extreme subjugation or exclusion from legal protection. Mbembe suggests that Agamben's concept does not fully account for the complexities of

modern forms of subjugation and violence, particularly those experienced under colonialism and in contemporary conflicts. Mbembe introduces the concept of "death worlds" as a corrective discourse to describe spaces where individuals are relegated to a state of living death, where life is constantly exposed to violence, precarity, and destruction. In such spaces, lives are subjected to conditions that make survival almost impossible, and they exist in a state of "living death", a disposable and precarious existence imposed not only through violence and conflict but by nuance form of subjugation and control.

The story illustrates how the villagers, particularly the gaonburahs (village elders), exist in a liminal space where their rights and agency are constantly threatened. As the narrator explains:

"If, during peacetime these elders enjoyed a privileged status, they became the most vulnerable ones when hostilities broke out between the Nagas and the Indian state" (Ao, 81).

This shift from privileged to vulnerable status underscores Agamben's notion that in a state of exception, anyone can be stripped of their political status and reduced to bare life.

The villagers face a double bind that exemplifies their precarious existence. On one hand, they are held responsible by the government if young men from their villages join the rebel forces. On the other, they face threats from the underground forces if they fail to provide recruits and material support. This impossible situation mirrors Agamben's description of how the state of exception creates a zone of indistinction between inside and outside, where individuals are subject to power but excluded from its protection.

The story vividly illustrates how this state of exception permeates everyday life. The constant threat of violence, the economic strain of double taxation, and the loss of autonomy over their own land and resources all contribute to the villagers' precarity. For instance, the narrative describes how villages that allow army camps to be set up become "prime suspects in the eyes of the underground and, as a form of punishment, were taxed double the amount" (Ao, 83). Demonstrating how every decision, even those made under duress, can lead to further vulnerability.

The precarious state of the villagers is perhaps most poignantly illustrated through the character of Tekaba, Imdongla's husband. His physical deterioration under the strain of his position is described vividly:

"Imdongla could see the effects of the terrible pressure on her husband; his hair had turned white, his face was gaunt with hunger and apprehension, and his eyes had a furtive look" (Ao, 84).

This description encapsulates how the state of exception inscribes itself on the bodies of those subject to it, reducing them to a state of constant fear and vulnerability. The story also highlights how the state of exception can be internalized and normalized. The villagers' reluctant acceptance of increasingly demanding "taxes" from the underground forces, and their compliance with government orders to relocate or clear land, demonstrate how exceptional circumstances can become the new normal.

However, the story also suggests possibilities sites for resistance within this precarious state. Imdongla's actions, from her clever intervention to save her husband from beating to her confrontation with the army captain, demonstrate how individuals can challenge the power structures that seek to reduce them to bare life. Imdongla's performance of a "mad woman" at the army camp is a strategic act that challenges the necropolitical power structure. Her insistence on bringing her husband's blanket and jacket to the army camp, and by threatening to disrobe, she performs a culturally significant act that forces the captain to reconsider his position, her performative acts of defiance are a final resort to reassert her humanity in the face of dehumanizing circumstance. As Ao suggests: "she stood up and made as if to take off her waist cloth which he knew was the ultimate insult a Naga woman could hurl at a man signifying his emasculation." The act itself is a distinctive cultural strategy that challenges the conventions of any sovereign structures enforced by any exceptional power.

As was the case in 15 July 2004, when twelve women disrobed and marched naked to Raj Bhawan as a protest against the unwarranted killing of Manorama Devi and the widespread atrocities committed by the Indian Army against the people of Manipur under AFSPA.

Ao's work demonstrates that necropolitics in Northeast India extends beyond the simple binary of state versus resistance. Instead, it permeates multiple layers of society, manifesting in the actions of state forces, insurgent groups, and even ordinary villagers caught in the crossfire. This multifaceted nature of necropolitics reveals the intricate power dynamics at play in conflict zones, where the power over life and death is not solely the domain of the state but is contested and exercised by various actors. The concept of "death- worlds," as proposed by Mbembe, finds vivid expression in Ao's narratives. Her characters inhabit spaces where the boundary between life and death is constantly blurred, and where survival often comes at the cost of moral compromise. This state of precarious existence, reminiscent of Agamben's "bare life," is not merely a theoretical construct but a lived reality for many in the region. Her stories also highlight the possibilities and limitations of resistance within necropolitical contexts. The resistance which is centred on a cultural

and tribal distinctiveness effectively creates a new site for strategic challenges that can effectively check the impunity of the necropolitical powers of AFSPA.

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