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Rhetoric Of Loss: Necropolitics and Poetic Witness in the Poetry of Robin Ngangom

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Abstract

This article examines the poetics of Robin S. Ngangom through the lens of necropolitics, engaging with Achille Mbembe's theory to explore how death, marginalization, and statesanctioned violence are rendered into poetic testimony. Situating Northeast India as a necropolitical frontier where sovereignty is exercised not through rights but through abandonment, the study foregrounds how poetry becomes a vehicle for resistance, memory, and ethical witnessing. The article argues that these poets develop a "rhetoric of loss" that subverts nationalist myths, implicates both the centre and the periphery in cycles of violence, and constructs an alternative archive of suffering. Through close readings of key poems, this paper reveals how poetic language offers a counter-narrative to the silences imposed by militarization and postcolonial statecraft. Ultimately, the work situates Northeastern poetry not as marginal but as central to understanding the affective and political landscapes of contemporary India.

INTRODUCTION

In regions marked by prolonged militarization, civil unrest, and bureaucratic abandonment, poetry often emerges not as ornament but as a form of survival. The Northeast of India, long peripheral to the national imagination, presents a landscape where literature and life are inextricably bound through the trauma of witnessing. In such a context, the poetics of Robin S. Ngangom demand critical attention. His poetry bear witness to a fractured world where death is not an end but a political tool, where mourning never concludes, and where memory must be militantly preserved. Their works articulate a dual burden: the mourning of bodies lost to violence, and the erosion of indigenous epistemologies, languages, and spiritual worlds under the slow pressures of both the state and market

In recent decades, literary scholarship has increasingly turned to the frameworks of biopolitics and necropolitics to interrogate how the state governs not just through life-affirming institutions but also through the management, orchestration, and normalization of death. Achille Mbembe's seminal theorization of Necropolitics (2019) disrupts Michel Foucault's life-centered biopolitical paradigm by foregrounding the modern sovereign's capacity to create "deathworlds" that is, zones of abandonment where individuals are exposed to the slow,

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often invisible violence of systemic neglect, surveillance, and militarized coercion (Mbembe 40). These are not spaces outside legality, but rather ones structured by a logic of exception, where the law is suspended in order to exercise absolute control over bodies and territories. Contrary to the Foucauldian model of biopolitics, where the state governs through the optimization of life, the Northeast is governed by as Amit Baishya writes in Contemporary Literature from Northeast India, "the Northeast is shaped, the Northeast is shaped by "a nervous and paranoid state [that] obsessively engages in criminal and paralegal operations" and militant groups that "are also disciplinary and necropolitical entities in their own right," capable of "punitive, coercive and disciplinary actions … while … maintaining complex relationships of conviviality and paternalistic control" (Baishya 3).

Here, laws such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) are not exceptional measures but normalized tools of statecraft that render certain populations permanently exposed to the threat of extrajudicial killing, disappearance, and displacement. These are not isolated acts of violence but structured, ritualized expressions of state power designed to create what Mbembe terms "living dead zones" social spaces where people live not as citizens but as subjects of abandonment (Mbembe 40). In Baishya's reading, the rhetoric of national security veils a psychotic sovereign logic, one that replaces rule of law with arbitrariness and terror. In this context, necropolitics is not a theoretical abstraction but a lived, daily condition where survival itself becomes resistance and memory becomes defiance.

Against this backdrop, the poetry of Robin S. Ngangom offers what may be called a rhetoric of loss: a literary articulation of grief, estrangement, memory, and mourning that neither forgets nor forgives the necropolitical structures they inhabit. As Sukla Singha argues, the personal in their poetry is never apolitical; it is deeply entwined with collective memory, historical trauma, and cultural erosion (Singha 20). Ngangom's repeated evocation of a homeland marred by "gory bodies" and "burning huts," or Nongkynrih's juxtaposition of Cherrapunjee's mythic past with its current barrenness and alienation, exemplify how memory becomes both an archive and a resistance to erasure.

In conflict zones such as Manipur, the suspension of lives under draconian laws creates margins of impunity, where laws like AFSPA and insurgent retaliations render life both hyper-visible as a target and invisible as a subject of rights. The result is not only a politics of fear but a regime of tolerated violence, in which the daily life of the citizen is never secure but always conditional. The citizens in Ngangom's poem are symbolically and materially abandoned, suspended in a zone where neither the Constitution nor insurgent ideology guarantees protection. As Loiya Leima Oinam notes in her study of Manipuri poetry, this lived experience of abandonment shapes a poetics that "documents a life of negotiated survival amid political non-being" (Oinam 4). The poem, then, does not merely mourn death; it records the slow violence of being kept alive under siege, an aesthetic rendering of what it means to be ruled through the threat of erasure. The poet suggests that attempts at accountability whether judicial, cultural, or memorial arrive only after the act of violation has been normalized, and are often impotent gestures in the face of systemic decay. In both poems Ngangom emphasizes the same impotency and helpless nature of an individual confronted by onslaught of brutality and absence of any structural base of justice which the poet laments are the only mode of existence.

Poets like Thangjam Ibopishak Singh, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih respond to such entrenched violence not by evoking grand narratives of resistance, but by documenting the slow erosion of subjecthood under overlapping regimes of state and non-state violence. In such poetic works, as Oinam observes, "militarism turns into a 'political culture,'" making violence not an aberration but the very grammar through which identity and belonging are negotiated (Oinam 3). Consider Thangjam Ibopishak Singh's poem "I Want to Be Killed by an Indian Bullet," translated by Robin S. Ngangom, when the speaker inquires, "Why will you kill me? What is my crime?" and is met with dismissive absurdities, the poem reinforces the disconnection between state power and justice.

The agents' answers are not just flippant; they are horrifying in their casualness. "We will kill you now. Our mission is to kill men." This is precisely the aspect of a necropolitical logic: killing becomes bureaucratic, even aestheticized, stripped of moral weight. It is no longer tied to guilt or innocence; it is simply a function of rule. Death in necropolitical regimes is no longer a means to an end; it is the end itself, an end without justification. The ideological basis of homeland or native lands are eventually futile when the logic of martyrdom is extended with the logic of a necropolitical dispossession. (Mbembe 88).

For Ngangom the act of writing becomes a defiance of silence and amnesia. As Ngangom remarks in the introduction to Dancing Earth, "to be a tenacious witness of the agonizing political violence without sensationalizing it, is also a risk that a north-eastern poet has to undertake often" (Ngangom and Nongkynrih, 12). Witnessing, in their verse, is not passive but a resistance, what Ngangom himself terms as "poetry of witness," in which aesthetics are marshalled not for abstraction but for testimony (Ngangom, Poetry in the Time of Terror 172). Meanwhile, poet like Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's engagement with Khasi and tribal memory becomes a mode of epistemic resistance.

By foregrounding death, grief, and dispossession not only as personal afflictions but as political conditions poets like Ngangom and Nongkynrih articulate a unique rhetoric of loss that resists both state-sanctioned narratives and literary marginalization. Their poetry stands as archival memory and a call for justice, a haunting reminder that silence too, in spaces of necropolitical sovereignty, is structured by power. There is however, an inherent paradox in the "romance of sovereignty" that at once prescribes an integrity of states within the broader context of India and the surreal reality enforced with the iron clad regulations such as AFSPA. While it would be fallacious to assume that literatures emerging from Northeast India caters specifically to the new precarious space of existence brought into effect by the long-protracted conflict both with the central powers and within the factions, there is however new spatial and geopolitical discourse to be found, the is limited to the changes created by the conflict. My focus here is to examine the two prominent poets' rhetoric of the dead that can illuminate the underlying systemic functionality of Necropolitics that has of recently been in focus for many a scholars, and as such, while the permittance of impunity under the Armed Forces Act can create "death worlds" or at least space for suspension of legality, my focus in on the new states of precarious lives that exists under such suspension rather than those of the much controversial law of AFSPA itself. What should then the poetic language of the changes wrought by violence be? For poet like Robin S. Ngangom the poetic rhetoric is an expression of loss and mourning as much it is about a resistance to the rhetoric of violence.

Robin S. Ngangom, born in 1959 in Imphal, Manipur, is a bilingual poet and translator who writes in English and Manipuri. His collections Words and the Silence (1988), Time's Crossroads (1994), and The Desire of Roots (2006) trace a poetic arc haunted by exile, violence, and loss. Often described as a "political poet," Ngangom's work is deeply shaped by the enduring militarization and insurgency in his native Manipur. His poetry reflects violent spaces where citizens survive not through rights but by navigating life under the shadow of state and non-state guns. Ngangom articulates this condition with unnerving candor. He describes how the Manipur of his childhood a land of "fairies and weretigers" and hill songs was slowly transformed into a "soldiers' barrack and dreaded chamber of torture" (Ngangom Poetry 169). This is brutally depicted in his poem Native Land, where he renders the perpetuity of violence and brutality into an affective loss and moral desensitization. The poem oscillates between what is evidently a brutal massacre and a sudden change in the tonality of the poem, Ngangom here remarks not just the normality of gore and death in a sustained violent space, but in effect the emasculating effect a protracted violence can have on an observer capable enough to see the horrors of it but with a Hamletian procrastination is unable to bring about any meaningful change with it:

- I hardened inside my thickening hide,
- until I lost my tenuous humanity.
- I ceased thinking
- of abandoned children inside blazing huts

- … I burnt my truth with them,
- and buried uneasy manhood with them.
- I did mutter, on some far-off day:
- "There are limits", but when the days
- absolved the butchers, I continue to live
- as if nothing happened. (Ngangom, Native Land)

The burial of the poet's "manhood" suggests an underlying shame in his helplessness, there is a hope for a poetic justice for the crimes the "butchers" committed, as the poet states the radio and newspaper reported: "six shot dead, twenty-five houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied behind their backs inside a church" however the normalcy of violence and the passive continuation of lives after such massacre affects a new ground of existence, one where the poet "continue to live as if nothing happened". Grief is no longer private it becomes historical, collective, and even disavowed. The poet's silence is not apathy, but the consequence of a normalized terror in which the dead are not mourned but absorbed into the rhythm of life.

This is not a poetry of confession or nostalgia but of survival. Ngangom writes that "Hardly anyone writes romantic verse or talks about disturbing sexuality because they are absorbed in writing the poetry of survival." (Ngangom, Poetry 172). Against the weaponization of everyday life what Mbembe sees as the transformation of life itself into a battlefield, Ngangom offer not resistance in the heroic sense, but a sustained witnessing, often laced with fatigue, irony, or absurdism. These poets master, observes, not through abstraction but through the accumulation of mundane horror "guns pressed at both your temples: the gun of revolution and the gun of the state" (172).

Similarly, in the poem "My Invented Land", Ngangom constructs a harrowing rhetoric of loss and death by portraying the homeland not as a site of belonging but as a necropolitical space marked by erasure, violence, and abandonment. The poem reveals how the sovereign state and even counter-sovereign nationalist movements produce zones of death, living under the constant threat of disappearance, violation, and historical amnesia, where citizens are reduced to spectral presences. Through images of shattered boundaries, desecrated culture, and failed leadership, the poem mourns not just physical death but the death of meaning, tradition, and future. The poem's recursive structure, unresolved metaphors, and stark juxtapositions evoke a homeland that exists only as a residue of trauma, a place where even memory is contaminated, from disillusioned youth who take refuge in drugs to failure of sovereignty the poem concludes in a kaleidoscopic view of the modern-day civil unrest of Manipur:

- My home is a gun
- pressed against both temples
- a knock on a night that has not ended
- a torch lit long after the theft
- a sonnet about body counts
- undoubtedly raped
- definitely abandoned
- in a tryst with destiny.

The poet radically destabilizes the very idea of home as a space of safety, warmth, or rootedness. Instead, the home becomes an instrument of destruction, turned inward, symbolizing a people trapped in a condition of double jeopardy, vulnerable to violence both from within and without. This image evokes a totalizing necropolitical condition, where the state of being is reduced to a suspended moment between life and death, in this rendering, the homeland is no longer a geography of belonging but a site of psychological and political entrapment. The poem's representation of a homeland caught between betrayal and silence, stands in for perpetual dread.

Further deepening this portrayal of a failed national imaginary, the poem calls the homeland "a sonnet about body counts." The use of the sonnet, becomes deeply ironic when repurposed as a container for atrocity and statistical dehumanization. Here, poetry itself is implicated in the machinery of forgetting or aestheticizing violence. Ngangom offers no comfort in lyricism; instead, he weaponizes it to catalogue deaths, suggesting that even art has become complicit in the normalization of loss. The subsequent lines, "undoubtedly raped / definitely abandoned," strip away euphemism and subtlety to confront the reader with the brutal reality of sexual violence and abandonment, not only of bodies but of entire peoples and histories. The use of the adverbs "undoubtedly" and "definitely" leaves no space for ambiguity or negotiation. The

trauma is neither imagined nor metaphorical it is historical, continuous, and deliberately inflicted. Gendered violence here becomes symbolic of a broader political violation, reflecting how sovereignty has failed its most vulnerable subjects.

The most politically charged commentary emerges through Ngangom's strategic deployment of the phrase "in a tryst with destiny," which functions as a direct citation of Jawaharlal Nehru's historic speech on the eve of India's independence in 1947. Nehru's original declaration: "At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom" (Nehru, Tryst with Destiny, 1947) was suffused with utopian hope and collective purpose, promising a future where colonial subjugation would give way to democratic self-determination. However, Ngangom's recontextualization of this phrase constitutes not an homage but a devastating accusation, revealing how the rhetoric of liberation has been transformed into a mechanism of ongoing oppression. Where Nehru envisioned awakening to "life and freedom," Ngangom's inversion exposes the bitter irony that independence has brought neither life nor freedom to India's peripheries, particularly the Northeast, where the so-called tryst with destiny has become a prolonged engagement with militarization, marginalization, and the systematic exposure to death. This intertextual strategy creates a palimpsest of necropolitical space, where the original promise of democratic inclusion is continuously overwritten by experiences of systematic exclusion and violence. The idealistic rhetoric of the nation-state its claims to represent all citizens equally, to guarantee rights and protections, to provide security and prosperity collapses under the weight of its own contradictions and exclusions.

For regions like Northeast India, national integration has meant not incorporation into a community of equals but subjugation to what Mbembe describes as democracy's "nocturnal bodies," the hidden underside of freedom sustained by colonial violence, domination, and racialized exclusion (Mbembe 27).The poet thus engages in what might be understood as a fundamental rewriting of the foundational myth of the republic, transforming the narrative of independence from a story of liberation into a testimony of ongoing loss and dispossession.

The significance of this literary strategy extends beyond mere political critique to encompass what might be termed testimonial necropolitics, the use of poetic form to preserve and transmit experiences of systematic dehumanization that official discourse seeks to obscure or deny. Poetry from Northeast India functions not only as aesthetic expression but as a repository of regional trauma and resistance. As Bhattacharjee and Guha argue, Nongkynrih's "insurgent poetics" challenges dominant literary norms and is "liable for exclusion from the canon of mainstream Indo-Anglian poetry," precisely because it voices experiences of "terrorism, insurgency, human rights abuses… and the corrupt politician-businessman-bureaucrat nexus" (Bhattacharjee and Guha 87). In this light, poets like Singh and Ngangom emerge not just as artists but as archival witnesses, preserving what official historiography neglects or represses.

The ideological basis of homeland narratives and indigenous claims to territory ultimately proves insufficient when confronted with the dual logic of martyrdom and necropolitical dispossession. The traditional framework of resistance predicated on the defense of sacred lands, cultural authenticity, and historical precedence cannot adequately address a form of power that operates through the systematic production of death-worlds and the management of populations through their exposure to killing. In this context, the poets' documentation of necropolitical violence serves not as a call to conventional resistance but as a form of testimonial preservation, ensuring that the experiences of systematic dehumanization are not erased from the historical record.

The final transformation of the poem into a counter-narrative, a testimony from the margins that refuses incorporation into dominant national mythologies reveals the broader political stakes of this literary project. By rewriting the foundational rhetoric of homeland, these poets create what might be understood as an alternative archive of the postcolonial condition, one that preserves experiences of ongoing

colonization disguised as national integration. This archive serves not only as a record of past violence but as a warning about the continued operation of necropolitical logics within contemporary democratic formations, reminding us that the promises of liberation remain unfulfilled for vast populations who continue to exist in conditions of systematic exposure to death. The complexity of this necropolitical condition becomes even more apparent when we examine how Ngangom's broader poetic project articulates what might is predominantly a peripheral existence, the lived experience of occupying spaces that the nation-state simultaneously claims and abandons. In his poem "15 August 2008, Northeast India", Ngangom begins with a stark personal **confession**:

- Having lost it
- How could I celebrate my Independence
- Though I've sewn flags on cockeyed schooldays? • Margins are superfluous in the big centre's book
- Although memory is not silent and speaks up at times.

This opening gesture immediately establishes the fundamental paradox of postcolonial citizenship for populations in India's peripheries, the obligation to perform national belonging while experiencing systematic exclusion from the benefits of that belonging. The image of sewing flags during "cockeyed schooldays" suggests both the indoctrination of patriotic duty and the essential absurdity of that indoctrination when viewed from the margins of the nation-state.

However, what sets Ngangom's poetic idiom apart is its refusal to idealize either the state or insurgency. His work recognizes the periphery's own complicity in violence: "The periphery can murder too" while simultaneously mourning the destruction of civic and affective life. This literature is not simply lamentation but also a form of cultural resistance rooted in place-based memory (Chakraborty 53). The rhetorical structure of his poetry saturated with disjointed memories, conflicted loyalties, and ironies of postcolonial nationhood becomes a literary geography of suffering and refusal.

- Now the periphery (of which I'm also a smudged part) • is scrawling a unique history on delusive margins, • mischievous like a collage by brawling painters.
- Once lebensraum has sunk to pogroms
- the periphery can murder too

Ngangom turns the lens inward, implicating not only the sovereign centre but also the peripheral subject in the orchestration of violence. In this, the poem enacts a critical self-interrogation of the periphery, refusing to romanticize marginality or victimhood. This suggests that necropolitical spaces are not solely top-down they may manifest as localized micro-sovereignties where insurgent violence, ethnic pogroms, and retaliatory logics mimic the state's own mechanisms of death. Here, the periphery internalizes and reproduces the same logics of elimination and exception that were once inflicted upon it. Moreover, the phrase "lebensraum has sunk to pogroms" invokes a historical and geopolitical layering that links Northeast India to broader genocidal logics of spatial conquest, such as Nazi territorial expansion. In doing so, Ngangom subtly draws a parallel between the ethnic homogenization attempts of state projects and the counter-violence they sometimes provoke. This formulation presents a perverse dialectic in which both the state and the insurgent reproduce each other's violence one in the name of sovereignty, the other in the name of freedom or identity. The poem's central metaphor of margins and centres provides a crucial framework for understanding how necropolitical power operates through spatial and textual exclusion. When Ngangom observes that "Margins are superfluous in the big centre's book," he articulates not merely geographical marginalization but what might be understood as discursive, the systematic erasure of peripheral voices from official narratives of national progress. However, the poem immediately complicates this apparent powerlessness by noting that "memory is not silent and speaks up at times," suggesting that the margins possess forms of agency that exist outside the centre's control. This tension between official silencing and persistent memory creates what the poem calls a "unique history" being "scrawled" on "delusive margins" a counter-archive that operates through the observations and lived

experiences that is at once intimate and often precarious, the poet of Northeast India "cannot merely indulge in verbal wizardry or woolly aesthetic" but must articulate in manners that reflect and protest without sensationalising or romanticising the rhetoric of the sovereign (Ngangom, Poetry 172) . The margins, then, are not mute, they are dangerously articulate, generating fragmented, ironic counter-narratives that resist state-sanctioned historiography and nationalist cohesion. The poem's conclusion, with its movement from public political critique to private meditation on love and intimacy, reveals the intimate affiliation of violence into the everyday which can penetrate even the most intimate spaces of human experience. When Ngangom writes, "I had silenced her shame with my mouth / And remain a freeloader of passion and its web," he suggests how the dehumanizing effects of political marginalization extend into personal relationships, creating forms of emotional and sexual alienation that mirror the broader patterns of social exclusion. This connection between public and private forms of violence reveals how necropolitical power operates not only through spectacular displays of state violence but through the subtle erosion of human capacity for genuine connection and reciprocity.

CONCLUSION

In confronting the lived realities of Northeast India, the poetry of Robin S. Ngangom does not merely aestheticize violence but interrogates the very grammar of statehood, memory, and survival. Their works function as counter-archives, registering the systematic erasure, dispossession, and abandonment that define necropolitical governance. By rejecting both nationalist triumphalism and insurgent romanticism, Ngangom crafts a rhetoric of witness that is ethically grounded and politically incisive. His verses refuse closure or consolation; instead, they foreground fragmentation, silence, and the impossible burden of remembering in spaces where forgetting is state policy. In articulating the "rhetoric of loss," Ngangom does not merely mourn; but expose the necropolitical condition of Indian democracy's margins. His poetry along with the poets from the margins, becomes a form of justice, not in institutional terms, but in its power to remember against erasure, to speak when silence is both easier and expected. As such, their work demands to be read not only as literature but as documentation as poetic dissent in the face of sovereign indifference. In the contested terrain between life and death, voice and silence, centre and margin, their poetics assert that even in abandonment, meaning can be made, and that to witness is, in itself, an act of political resistance.

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