



POETRY AS COUNTER-ARCHIVE:

MONA ZOTE'S POETICS OF ABJECTION AND DECOLONIAL RESISTENCE IN "ANTI-LOVE POEM" and "REZ"

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Abstract: Mona Zote's poetry articulates a potent decolonial epistemology through radical formal innovation. This paper examines how "Anti-love Poem" and "Rez" transform poetic structure into a site of ontological resistance against historical erasure and state-sanctioned violence in Mizoram. Through anaphoric negation, visceral fragmentation, and a deliberate "conspiracy against itself," Zote's work performs a violent hermeneutics that excises colonial paradigms and materializes the abject body as a counter-archive of the "untelevised truth." Grounded in the Mizo historical experience of the AFSPA-era and informed by the legend of Pi Nghaki, her poetry enacts a Fanonian rupture, forging an insurgent cartography of memory. Ultimately, Zote's form operates not as representation but as constitutive ontology, a grammatical matrix where silenced histories achieve articulation and demand an ethical response.

Index Terms: Decolonization, Poetic Form, Mizo Resistance, Historical Trauma, Testimonial Hermeneutics

Introduction

Poetic form, far from being a mere aesthetic choice, can function as a profound site of ontological resistance, particularly in geographies marked by complex historical experiences and contested narratives. Mona Zote, a pivotal contemporary voice from Northeast India, exemplifies this assertion. Her poetic oeuvre transcends simple artistic expression to become a crucial intervention in the geopolitical realities it portrays, deeply implicated in the lived experiences of Mizoram. The region's modern identity is inextricably linked to the *Rambuai* period (1966-1986), a significant chapter characterized by violent political mobilization and significant administrative measures.

The *Rambuai* period witnessed the Mizo National Front's campaign for political self-determination. During this era, Indian security forces conducted operations to maintain administrative continuity. The Indian government enacted the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in 1967, providing a legal framework for military operations that included specific powers related to detention, search, and the maintenance of public order. Concurrently, an administrative strategy termed 'grouping' involved the relocation of dispersed village communities into centralized settlements. In 1966, the Indian Air Force conducted aerial operations over Aizawl. These combined historical developments, encompassing violent political mobilization, security operations under AFSPA, administrative reorganization through grouping, and the aerial deployment, contributed significantly to the formation of collective memory in contemporary Mizo society. The period concluded with the 1986 Mizoram Peace Accord, establishing the region's current political status.

A critical aspect of this historical context is the minimal national media coverage of these events, leaving many Mizo experiences largely undocumented in mainstream Indian narratives (Lalmachhuana et al. 199-202). This relative silence creates a significant historical gap that literature, especially poetry, is ethically and politically positioned to address. Zote's work, therefore, does not merely reflect or document history; it actively performs a counter-archival function, making the "untelevised truth" visible and legible. Her formal choices are thus not merely stylistic embellishments but deeply significant interventions, challenging mechanisms of historical omission and the marginalization of specific narratives. The poetic imperative, in

this context, becomes a means of asserting perspectives that have been less visible, transforming complex experiences into a powerful testament.

This paper argues that Mona Zote's poetic forms, specifically the relentless anaphoric negation in "Anti-love Poem"¹ and the jarring fragmented collage in "Rez", do not merely describe Mizoram's "untelevised truth" but actively decode and resist its historical marginalization through a violent hermeneutics where structure itself enacts ontological defiance against colonial epistemologies and state-imposed silence. This analysis is anchored in Zote's stark declaration that "Anti-love Poem" is "a poem celebrating the impossibility of arrival and the necessity of violence." This statement encapsulates the enduring nature of the struggle and the refusal of easy resolutions or pacified narratives, resonant with the Mizo experience during the *Rambuai* period. The concept of "necessity of violence" is not merely thematic but a formal imperative; if the historical context of Mizoram is inherently violent, then a poem seeking to authentically represent this "untelevised truth" cannot do so through conventional, aesthetically "polite" forms. The poem's own formal choices, its anaphora, fragmentation, and visceral imagery, become a mimetic response to, and a re-enactment of, this historical violence, thereby actively resisting its sanitization or erasure.

This central argument is further grounded by the profound Mizo legend of Pi Nghaki, whose burial alive for composing numerous songs serves as a potent, multi-layered metaphor for cultural suppression and the enduring, accusing voice of the silenced indigenous artist. Pi Nghaki's "accusing gong" reinforces this notion, suggesting that even voices physically buried continue to resonate with a challenging and unyielding truth, embodying a form of resistance that transcends physical suppression and demands ethical engagement. Zote's poetry, therefore, performs a kind of "formal insurgency," mirroring the historical struggle for decolonization in its very construction, thereby making the act of reading a direct participation in this ongoing resistance.

This paper undertakes a hermeneutic excavation of how Mona Zote's poetic form enacts an embodied epistemology of resistance. Through close reading of "Anti-love Poem" and "Rez," we demonstrate how these formal devices materially constitute what "Anti-love Poem" terms the "untelevised truth" of Mizoram's geopolitical reality. The analysis reveals poetic structure as a site of historical inscription, where rhythmic negation ("It is not...") archives the spatial violences of Mizoram's AFSPA era through ritualistic excision of colonial paradigms. This archival praxis extends into "Rez's" fragmentation of signifiers, where collisions like "Star Trek via Doordarshan" and "AK-47" generate insurgent cartographies counter-mapping militarized consciousness. The paper will examine how Kristeva's abject is materially encoded in corporeal imagery, while Fanon's decolonial rupture manifests in shattering syntactic structures. Furthermore, it will explore how Zote's metapoetic strategy of self-sabotage, the poem's "conspiracy against itself", prevents coercive interpretation and maintains the radical openness of testimony. Finally, through the theoretical lens of Levinasian ethics, the paper will consider how the persistent resonance of Pi Nghaki's "accusing gong" transforms historical trauma into an enduring ethical imperative. Consequently, Zote's form operates not as expressive medium but as constitutive ontology of resistance, a grammatical matrix wherein Mizoram's silenced histories achieve articulation and demand response.

The Grammar of Refusal: Anaphoric Excision and the Decolonial Void

Zote's "Anti-love Poem" transcends conventional lyricism to enact a radical decolonial praxis, its power emanating from the relentless anaphoric negation "It is not...", which functions as a dialectical engine. This strategy simultaneously dismantles imposed colonial and romantic epistemologies while forging an autonomous ontological space for Mizo reality. The poem's opening salvo and its subsequent rhythmic refusals perform a precise, surgical excision of dominant paradigms. By systematically rejecting conventional poetic subjects, lovers basking in an "easy plain of contentment," boys embodying pastoral exoticism under the "fig tree," or the trivialized world of "migrants, painters and guitar players" sheltered within a "bureaucracy of minor passions", the text clears the discursive field of distorting frameworks. This excision directly confronts the colonial dynamic Frantz Fanon identified, where oppressive forces distort the colonized subject's sense of self and history, imposing romanticized or 'whitened' narratives that obscure material violence (Fanon, *Black Skin* 89). The refusal to aestheticise suffering or participate in constructs like liberal humanitarianism is, therefore, a foundational act of ontological resistance. It assaults the very categories of being and knowing imposed by the colonial gaze, asserting that the Mizo experience defies containment within externally manufactured, often Western, ideals such as romantic love, exoticised leisure, or facile notions of sanctuary.

This dismantling extends with ferocity into the political sphere. The negation targeting those who "protest at the oiled guns of democracy," "park in a free speech zone," or uphold a "stockpile of mass ethics" delivers a scathing indictment of Western democratic ideals as hypocritical and inherently violent when universalized. The contrast with the innate "democracy," "freedom," and "faith" of birds underscores how

these human institutions function as tools of colonial control. The anaphoric structure here becomes a formal mechanism for un-disfiguring Mizo historicity. Each “It is not...” syntactically resists the erasure, actively pushing back against the distortion of the past and the ongoing violence embodied by instruments like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and its spatial brutalities, airstrikes, forced grouping. This negation is thus an active, resistant un-writing, not passive silence.

Crucially, this rigorous excision initiates a profound dialectical process aimed at ontological regeneration. The repetitive voids carved out by negation are not empty absences; they function as topological spaces, grammatical wounds within the poem’s structure. Cleared of colonial clutter and romantic trivialization, these spaces create the essential conditions for the reassembly and crystallization of silenced Mizo narratives and counter-memories. The relentless “It is not...” methodically strips away the obscuring layers, making possible the emergence of the “whole sad untelevised truth.” This truth finds its potent, historically saturated expression precisely because the space for it has been violently opened. The dialectic culminates in the poem’s concluding couplet: “I know if I should kiss you / your mouth would taste of love and whiskey.” Here, the abstract universal concept of “love”, one of the romantic ideals potentially negated earlier, is irrevocably contaminated and made historically specific by the intrusion of “whiskey.” This single word injects the traumatic reality of the *Rambuai* era, a period defined by violent insurgency, state counter-insurgency, prohibition, and its associated brutalities directly into the heart of romantic abstraction. It is the visceral materialization of the decolonial ontology forged within the gaps created by refusal.

This final image crystallizes the generative power of Zote’s negative dialectics. Each excised category (“lovers,” “democracy,” “faith”) leaves behind a wound in the grammatical and conceptual fabric. Yet, this wound paradoxically “heals as counter-memory.” The taste of whiskey is not merely a detail; it is insurgent subjectivity erupting from the silence enforced by colonial epistemology, a silence the poem weaponizes to archive resistance. The form itself enacts Fanon’s “cleansing force” moving beyond theoretical critique of internalized colonialism into a formal praxis of creation (Fanon, *Wretched* 94). The poem’s irreducible power stems from this dialectical unity: the act of refusal is simultaneously the act of making space for, and ultimately materializing, an unvarnished, historically rooted truth. Through its rhythmic excision of colonial/romantic paradigms, “Anti-love Poem” performs a radical de-linking from imposed epistemologies, asserting an autonomous Mizo reality. Simultaneously, through the generative absences birthed by this excision, it actively forges a new decolonial ontology, embedding suppressed history and trauma within the very structure it negates. The anaphoric negation thus transforms from a tool of dismantling into the dynamic engine of a resurgent world.

In “Rez”, Zote constructs a landscape of a consciousness besieged, employing a jarring, fragmented collage of images and references that immerses the reader in the cognitive dissonance of life within a militarized reality. If “Anti-love Poem” clears the ground through systematic refusal, “Rez” occupies that contested space with the shrapnel of a shattered reality, constructing what can be termed a “collage warfare.” This technique moves beyond mere representation to immerse the reader directly in the cognitive and sensory dissonance of a consciousness shaped by conflict, where the violent juxtaposition of pop-cultural signifiers and symbols of militarization becomes a formal analogue for the psychological experience of life under the shadow of the AFSPA-era. The poem’s opening gambit, “A boy & his gun: that’s an image will do to sum up our times to define the red lakes and razor blade hills of our mind,” immediately establishes a landscape where external violence has become inextricably internalized, mapping a traumatized psychological terrain. This is not a detached observation but a lived condition, and the poem’s structure insists we inhabit it.

The critical power of Zote’s method lies in its specific, jarring collisions. The potent symbol of the “AK-47,” a global metonym for insurgency and revolutionary violence, is not contrasted with something traditionally “tribal” or “native” but is instead slammed against the bizarrely mundane “Star Trek via Doordarshan.” This pairing is a masterstroke of critical juxtaposition. It signifies the deep, disorienting penetration of both globalized media fantasies and state-controlled broadcast narratives (Doordarshan representing the Indian national broadcaster) into the local psyche. It creates a hyper-real space where the epic, fictionalized future of “Star Trek” bleeds into the immediate, visceral reality of armed struggle, short-circuiting any attempt to process experience through a single, coherent narrative framework. This disorientation is further compounded by the character of the “Angel,” who casually mentions having “gunned down Virtual Viktor the smiling Ruskie” before nonchalantly stating, “My shoes are Japanese.” Here, the abstraction of virtual, video-game violence is abruptly anchored in the banal materiality of consumer goods, illustrating how the global flow of capital and culture is entangled with the local experience of conflict, creating a schizoid reality where identities are assembled from disparate and often contradictory imported parts.

This “collage warfare” operates as a potent form of Fanonian revolt. Fanon’s analysis of the psychological fragmentation inflicted by colonialism finds its formal expression in this shattered syntax. The colonized mind, as Fanon argues, is a site of fracture (Fanon, *Wretched* 252), and Zote’s poetics mimetically embodies this state. However, it is crucial to argue that this is not a passive reflection of fragmentation but an active, weaponised deployment of it. The violent interpretive act required to make sense of the collision between “Star Trek” and “AK-47” itself performs a “cleansing force,” shattering the coherent, sanitized narratives offered by both the colonial state and global consumer culture. It is a formal insurgency that refuses the comfort of a unified subject or a linear history. Within this chaotic assemblage, the phrase “Swaraj: acid anthem in our veins” erupts not as a harmonious national anthem but as a corrosive, transformative catalyst. This “acid” suggests a painful, burning process of purification and reclamation, eating away at the internalized residues of colonial epistemology to make space for a self-rule that is felt viscerally, in the very blood, rather than understood merely as a political abstraction.

The poem’s critical edge is sharpest in its unflinching grounding of this fragmented consciousness in specific, material history. The reference to the “reservation” directly tethers the poem’s aesthetic disarray to the tangible trauma of the AFSPA-era and the “grouping” policy, which violently reconfigured social and physical space. The poem’s form, in this reading, becomes a cognitive map of that “troubled land” (*Rambuai*), its jarring transitions and unresolved tensions mirroring the social and psychological ruptures caused by security operations and administrative reorganization. However, a critical analysis must also acknowledge the potential perils of this method. The very fragmentation that so powerfully resists assimilation into dominant narratives also risks enacting a kind of epistemological entrapment, mirroring the chaos of trauma without necessarily offering a clear path through it. The “acid anthem” burns, but its ultimate transformative melody remains elusive, purposefully unresolved. This is not a weakness but a profound honesty; Zote’s revolt lies in her refusal to offer a pacified, easily consumable version of resistance or recovery. The collage, in its relentless and unsettling juxtapositions, insists that the “untelevised truth” of this history is not a single story but a cacophony of conflicting memories, imported images, and painful scars that cannot be synthesized into a simple whole. Thus, “Rez” extends the ontological project of “Anti-love Poem”: where one uses negation to clear the discursive field, the other uses explosive fragmentation to rebuild a world from the debris, a world that is intentionally unstable, critically aware of its own constructedness, and vibrantly, defiantly alive with the unresolved energy of its own history.

Corporeal Manifestos: The Abject Body as Counter-Archive

Zote’s poetics consistently mobilizes the body not as a mere metaphor but as the primary site where the violences of history are inscribed, endured, and ultimately transformed into a potent medium of testimony. This relentless focus on somatic reality functions as a critical, materialist counterpoint to her epistemological dismantling of colonial paradigms, anchoring the abstract struggle for decolonial selfhood in the palpable evidence of wound and sensation. The pervasive visceral imagery in both “Anti-love Poem” and “Rez” powerfully materializes Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject, forcing the unassimilable truth of bodily trauma into the realm of the speakable.

In “Anti-love Poem,” the unsettling image of “blood and leaves on their chests” operates as a foundational moment of abjection. This juxtaposition is not merely violent but profoundly ambiguous and transgressive; the organic, even pastoral, connotation of “leaves” is contaminated by the stark bodily reality of “blood,” creating a composite that disturbs clear symbolic boundaries. It suggests a violence that is both primal and intimate, a stain that is at once natural and horrific, leaving a physical mark that resonates with unsettling force. This early hint of bodily transgression is amplified and relentlessly detailed in “Rez,” where the language becomes more direct and harrowing. The poem maps a psychological landscape directly onto the corporeal with “the red lakes and razor blade hills of our mind,” a formulation that makes internal trauma externally palpable and physically violent. This is not an abstract suffering but a felt, bodily experience, further grounded in the acute physical sensation of a “tightening of the temples” and the stark, unadorned mention of “people getting shot.”

This visceral imagery must be understood within its specific historical context, a period where the legal framework of AFSPA sanctioned the ultimate intrusion upon the body, granting powers that led to widespread documented abuses. The pervasive physical violence of that era, where the state’s power was literally inscribed on the bodies of its citizens through acts of torture, disappearance, and sexualized violence, forms the unspoken subtext of Zote’s poetic language. Kristeva’s abject is defined precisely as that which “disturbs identity, system, and order,” that which “does not respect borders, positions, rules”. It is the “brutish suffering” that reveals the horror of existence beyond societal norms (Kristeva 4). In a postcolonial context, abjection translates to the state of being cast out as ‘other,’ a condition frequently represented

through themes of trauma and violence. Zote's poetry, in giving voice to the "red lakes" and "razor blade hills," actively summons this abject reality. It forces into discourse the very elements, the blood, the pain, the fear, that the dominant historical narrative seeks to sanitize, suppress, or cast out. The body in her work is not a symbolic vessel but the very substance of historical testimony, its wounds and sensations constituting a counter-archive against official amnesia.

However, a critical reading must also confront the potential double-bind of this abject aesthetic. While the articulation of this bodily horror functions as a powerful form of "imperative witness," compelling an acknowledgment of repressed truths, it also risks re-inscribing a gaze that is inherently traumatic. The act of making the violated body visible, even for the purpose of resistance, can sometimes partake in a dynamic where marginalization is perpetuated through the spectacle of suffering. Does the repeated invocation of "blood" and "razor blades" run the risk of aestheticizing pain, of transforming historical trauma into a literary trope available for consumption? Zote's work seems acutely aware of this danger, and its genius lies in its refusal to offer catharsis or redemption. The abject in her poetry is not presented for pity or for a facile sense of resolution; it is presented as an unassimilable fact. The "acid anthem" of Swaraj burning in the veins is not a healing balm but a corrosive agent. This refusal to sanitize or resolve is itself a critical political stance. By presenting the abject in all its unsettling and non-cathartic rawness, Zote's poetry performs a crucial function: it acts as a "scalpel, not salve," cutting through comforting illusions and polite discourse to expose the raw nerve of colonial trauma. The poetry does not allow the reader to consume the trauma passively; it implicates the reader in the very act of witnessing, making the experience of reading one of uncomfortable, even unwilling, participation. Thus, the materialization of the abject becomes the final, crucial step in Zote's decolonial project. If her form clears the epistemological ground and occupies it with fragmented signs, it is the abject body that provides the foundational, bloody soil from which a new, unflinching and resistant Mizo consciousness can emerge, not through healing, but through the insistent, unforgetting presence of its wounds.

The evolution of blood imagery across Mona Zote's work establishes a sophisticated hermeneutics of embodied trauma, moving beyond symbolic suggestion to articulate a stark grammar of state violence. This progression from the ambiguously poetic "blood and leaves on their chests" in *Anti-love Poem* to the explicit, weaponised context of "people getting shot" and the "AK-47" in "Rez" signifies a critical refinement in her poetic strategy. The earlier image, while visceral, retains a layer of ambiguity; the blood is almost elemental, mingling with organic matter in a way that could imply a naturalized or mythic violence. In "Rez", however, any such ambiguity is violently stripped away. The blood is no longer part of a poetic tableau but is explicitly shed by the bullet, a direct consequence of the political and military logic encapsulated by the rifle. This discernible shift is not merely a change in descriptive style but a profound hermeneutic movement from the suggestive to the evidentiary, forcing the reader to transition from interpreting a symbol to confronting a documented fact.

This blood semiotics operates by transforming the violated body into a central, contested text where the inscriptions of history are unavoidably legible. The body becomes the primary archive for what Zote terms the "untelevised truth," a direct challenge to the "minimal" national media coverage and the state's strategies of silencing and omission. Every mention of blood thus functions as a counter-narrative, a stark riposte to official amnesia. This aligns with the historical reality of the AFSPA era, where the legal sanction of the "power to shoot to kill" and the documented use of rape as a tactical weapon fundamentally made the Mizo body the central battleground of the conflict. The poetry does not just describe this reality; it enacts it by making the reader's encounter with the text an encounter with the bodily evidence of that violence. The imagery forces an acknowledgment that the "plight becoming a part of daily life" was not an abstract condition but a physical one, experienced in the flesh and blood of individuals and the collective social body.

However, a critical analysis must probe the implications of this relentless focus on the violated body as a testifying medium. While its power as an undeniable record of oppression is immense, this strategy also navigates a complex ethical and representational terrain. The risk of reifying trauma, of transforming profound suffering into a literary device for consumption by an audience potentially distant from its reality, is a constant shadow. Does the poetic framing of bloodshed, however explicit, inevitably aestheticise it, potentially distancing us from the very horror it seeks to communicate? Zote's work seems to confront this danger through its unflinching and anti-cathartic presentation. The blood in "Rez" is not offered for sentimental consumption or pity; it is presented as a stark, material fact, a corrosive agent that disrupts comfortable reading. This method constitutes a form of ethical provocation, implicating the reader in the economy of witnessing. We are not allowed to be passive observers of this bodily text; we are forced to

become its interpreters, compelled to grapple with the historical and political systems that produced its wounds.

Consequently, Zote's blood semiotics evolves into a powerful hermeneutics of resistance. The body, in its abject and wounded materiality, becomes the ultimate site of decolonial assertion. If colonial and state power sought to inscribe their authority through violence onto this very body, Zote's poetry performs a defiant re-inscription. It takes the marks of subjugation, the blood shed by the bullet, the trauma inflicted by sanctioned terror, and transforms them into an indelible text of accusation and memory. This is not a glorification of suffering but a solemn appropriation of its evidence. The blood signifies neither victory nor defeat, but rather the unassailable fact of having endured and the unwavering will to record that endurance against all attempts to erase it. In this way, the semiotics of blood completes the ontological project initiated by Zote's formal innovations: it provides the raw, material content that fills the space cleared by anaphoric negation and gives the shattered fragments of collage their most potent and cohesive meaning. The body itself becomes the final and most authoritative testament to the "untelevised truth."

This act of formal self-interrogation emerges not as a separate philosophical exercise but as a necessary, even inevitable, consequence of the poem's relentless focus on the violated body as the primary text of historical truth. Having established a "blood semiotics" where the physical marks of violence become the only reliable archive against state erasure, the poem confronts a profound crisis of representation: how can language ever adequately convey the raw, immediate truth of the body in pain? "Anti-love Poem" culminates its decolonial project through a profound moment of metapoetic self-interrogation, articulated in the declaration: "It is a poem that has agreed to conspire against itself." This is not a moment of artistic indecision but a sophisticated hermeneutic strategy, a deliberate formal sabotage that challenges the very possibility of coherent representation in the face of historical trauma. This move radically extends the poem's earlier ontological and epistemological ruptures by turning its critical gaze inward, questioning the authority of its own voice and the language it must necessarily employ. The statement functions as a key to the poem's entire architecture, revealing that its violence is directed not only outward at colonial paradigms but also inward at its own potential for complicity, simplification, or aesthetic failure. The poem elaborates on this inherent paradox, stating, "For to write a poem against love you must first have written a poem about love," thereby acknowledging an inescapable entanglement with the very structures it seeks to dismantle. To oppose something, one must first name it, and in that naming, risk reifying its power or being absorbed by its logic. This self-reflexivity transcends mere stylistic device, becoming a crucial ethical and philosophical engagement with the problem of articulating a truth that has been systematically distorted and denied.

This formal "conspiracy" against the self operates as a necessary act of linguistic decolonization, a concept that finds a powerful analogue in Frantz Fanon's mapping of the psychic journey from a desire to assimilate to a violent rejection of that assimilation (Fanon, *Wretched* 61). Just as Fanon's colonized subject must purge internalized oppression, Zote's poem purges itself of any lingering attachment to poetic coherence as a form of ideological comfort. The refusal of "easy coherence" or a "singular, authoritative voice" is thus a radical political stance. It prevents the poem from becoming a facile counter-narrative that could itself harden into a new dogma, a constant danger in contexts of militant resistance. Instead, by embracing its internal tensions and contradictions, the poem formally mirrors the "troubled land" of Mizoram itself, a reality that cannot be neatly summarized or resolved. This "impossibility of arrival," which Zote names as a central theme, is thus baked into the poem's very structure through this self-sabotaging mechanic.

However, this strategy also introduces a critical aporia that must be acknowledged. While this relentless self-interrogation guards against ideological purity and authoritative closure, it simultaneously risks enacting a kind of hermeneutic paralysis. If the poem is constantly undermining its own capacity to testify, to what extent can it effectively function as the "imperative witness" it aims to be? Does this sophisticated deconstruction of its own authority ultimately dilute the force of its testimony, potentially leaving the reader in a space of pure, unresolved critique? The poem's power lies in its refusal to resolve this tension. It does not offer a solution but performs the problem itself. The act of reading becomes an "ethically demanding hermeneutic process," where the reader is forced to actively wrestle with the "untelevised truth" that the poem points toward but refuses to deliver in a sanitized, consumable package. The truth exists in the gaps between what is asserted and what is immediately retracted, in the silence that surrounds the relentless negations. In this way, the metapoetic sabotage does not negate the testifying function but radically redefines it. Testimony is no longer a matter of transparent reportage but a fraught, self-conscious, and perpetually unfinished act of excavation that implicates both the speaker and the listener in the difficult labor of meaning-making. This final, self-directed violence completes the poem's decolonial arc: having used anaphora to excise the external colonial gaze and the abject to materialize the violated body, it uses

self-sabotage to preemptively dismantle any new orthodoxy that might arise from its own utterance, ensuring its resistance remains perpetually critical and alive.

The Ethical Demand: Metapoetic Sabotage and the Imperative of the Other

The ethical imperative that emerges from Mona Zote's metapoetic self-interrogation finds its most potent cultural articulation in the haunting presence of Pi Nghaki, the Mizo poet buried alive for her overwhelming creative power. This legend does not merely serve as a thematic reference but operates as the foundational ethical substrate of Zote's entire decolonial project, providing a mythological framework for understanding the poem's relentless formal and ethical struggles. Where the poem's self-sabotage guards against new orthodoxies and its blood semiotics archives bodily trauma, the figure of Pi Nghaki transforms this entire endeavor into a Levinasian encounter with the silenced Other. Her burial, motivated by a fear that her prolific songwriting would exhaust all future creative expression, becomes a profound metaphor for the colonial and post-colonial suppression of indigenous Mizo voices, cultural practices, and artistic expression, a historical reality that aligns with the broader systemic silencing of narratives from Northeast India.

Pi Nghaki's "accusing gong," ringing persistently from beneath the earth, represents more than cultural memory; it manifests the unyielding ethical demand of the silenced Other who refuses interment. This resonates with Emmanuel Levinas's ethics, where the 'revelation of the other' constitutes the foundational ethical act, an encounter that precedes and dismantles the autonomous self (Levinas 194-196). For Levinas, the face of the Other, or in this powerful auditory translation, the sound of the buried gong, possesses an "unlimited power to give the self order," serving as both "warning and prayer of 'do not kill me'." The gong's incessant ringing signifies that suppressed truth and violated identity cannot be fully erased; they continue to make an undeniable claim on the present, disrupting comfortable narratives and demanding acknowledgment. Zote's invocation of this legend thus transforms the poem into a crucial medium for this ethical encounter, forcing the reader to confront the absolute exteriority and supremacy of the Other and to assume responsibility for those whose voices and histories have been systematically marginalized.

However, a critical tension arises when applying Levinas's philosophy, which centers on a face-to-face encounter, to a context where the Other is not merely absent but has been actively buried and silenced. The ethical risk here is one of ventriloquism or appropriation: can the poem truly let the Other speak, or does it inevitably speak for them, however well-intentioned? The poem's metapoetic conspiracy against itself can be seen as a direct response to this ethical danger. By sabotaging its own authority and coherence, the poem acknowledges the impossibility of fully representing the buried Other without betrayal. It refuses to offer Pi Nghaki's voice as a consumable artifact, instead presenting her gong as an unsettling, unresolved demand that the poem itself cannot satisfy but only point toward. This moves the ethical encounter from the realm of representation to that of responsibility; the poem does not claim to resurrect Pi Nghaki's voice but rather constructs a formal space where her accusation can resonate, implicating the reader in the ongoing labor of listening and response.

In this way, Zote's poetry transforms historical injustice from a documented fact into a persistent, vibrating ethical call. The legend ceases to be a passive cultural reference and becomes an active hermeneutic principle. The "accusing gong" is the theoretical counterpart to the "blood semiotics", where one inscribes trauma on the body, the other inscribes it on the ethical conscience. It completes the poem's decolonial arc by answering the question of purpose: for whom and for what does this witnessing occur? The answer is found in the infinite demand of the buried poet, whose silenced song becomes the ultimate "untelevised truth," ensuring that the project of resistance remains not just political or historical, but fundamentally ethical, demanding active listening, critical engagement, and perpetual moral accountability from its audience long after the poem has consented to conspire against its own closure.

Mona Zote's poetic project culminates in a formidable hermeneutics of resistance, where form and content fuse to articulate an epistemology that is irrevocably rooted in the historical and corporeal experience of Mizoram. The rigorous anaphoric negation of Anti-love Poem and the jarring, visceral collage of Rez are not mere aesthetic choices but constitute a profound decolonial methodology. Through these strategies, Zote performs what can be termed an ontological clearing: a systematic dismantling of colonial and romantic paradigms that obscures the "untelevised truth." This formal excision creates a vacuum, a topological space within the poem's structure, which is then filled with the abject, testifying body, the blood, the wound, the silenced voice, transforming the poem into a counter-archive against state-sanctioned amnesia. This movement from negation to materialization finds its ultimate ethical charge in the haunting legend of Pi Nghaki, whose accusing gong resonates with a Levinasian demand, transforming historical trauma into an imperative for ethical witness and holding the reader accountable to the silenced Other.

The radical power of this project is its refusal of closure, a principle embedded in its very structure. The declaration that Anti-love Poem “has agreed to conspire against itself” is a metapoetic sabotage that prevents the work from congealing into a new orthodoxy. This self-directed violence ensures that the decolonial consciousness it fosters remains perpetually critical, active, and alive to its own complicities. It is this relentless self-interrogation that validates the poetry’s final, defiant assertion of agency in the concluding lines of Rez: “The things you have to say, no one can say them for you / The places you have to go, no one can go there for you / The hills you have to burn, no one can burn them for you.” These lines are not a conclusion but a manifesto for perpetual becoming. They reframe the “impossibility of arrival” not as failure but as the necessary condition for a self-determined struggle, a continuous process of meaning-making that rejects all external definition.

Consequently, Zote’s work transcends its specific context to offer a crucial methodological framework for engaging with the broader literary and historical landscape of Northeast India. Her “grammar of refusal” and her “corporeal manifestos” provide a sophisticated critical lens for understanding how literature from conflict zones can resist historical erasure and misrepresentation. By demonstrating how formal innovation, the strategic use of negation, fragmentation, and the abject, can itself become a potent political act, Zote establishes a template for interpreting the subversive aesthetics that often characterize writing from the peripheries of national narratives. Her poetry, therefore, stands as more than a testament to Mizo resilience; it is a vital, uncompromising model of decolonial thought in action, a scalpel that dissects the pathologies of history to affirm, in the rawest terms, the unassailable right to an autonomous voice and an unarrived, yet fiercely sought, horizon.

Note

¹All textual citations of Mona Zote’s “Anti-love Poem” and “Rez” are derived from their publication in Nandana Dutta and Robin S. Ngangom’s edited anthology, *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India* (Penguin Books, 2009, pp. 310-318).

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