

*Insurgent Cultures: World Literatures and Violence from the Global South*

Pavan Kumar Malreddy

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Pavan Malreddy's *Insurgent Cultures: World Literatures and Violence from the Global South* (2024) offers a rigorous and fascinating examination of the cultures of insurgency as it is represented in Global South literatures. Structured into four thematic chapters (excluding the Introduction), Malreddy's vibrant writing takes us across an expansive literary terrain in order to tease out the ways these literatures imagine and portray insurgency. Theoretically informed, rich in contextualization and breath-taking in scope, *Insurgent Cultures* traces insurgent acts to unlikely places (the subterranean, Twitter, a bedroom), personas (a tango dancer or a Frankenstein figure patched-up with assorted body parts of the dead) and practices (such as corpse-washing) in order to tease out novel ways of thinking insurgency and the unique literary strategies with which to represent it. Focusing on contemporary, post-independence conflicts and their aftermath as they come to be narrated in the selected texts under discussion, Malreddy's overarching claim is that violence (and hence the insurgent acts which arise in response to it) is malleable rather than rigid, visceral rather than reasoned, and cellular rather than generalized. It can mobilize human and non-human bodies as the vehicles of its enactment. It resides in the miniscule rather than the grand. Malreddy's project demonstrates how literatures from the Global South decelerate violence, making it unfold like the swell of the sea. Insurgency requires, Malreddy argues, a micro-optics instead of an all-encompassing gaze.

Malreddy's nuanced understanding of violence in the Global South, signaled in the very title of the book, often rests on a set of startling, almost oxymoronic concepts (the eponymous *insurgent cultures* being one of them). Thus "intimate violence" (95), "absent presence of violence" (51), "divine violence" (187) and "ghostly insurgency" (199), to name a few, wend their way across all the chapters of the book: the first is devoted to the critical proximities between oil, insurgency and violence in the Nigerian context and their literary representations; the second examines the intimacies of violence in Burmese Anglophone literature, unpacking the imbrications of desire (for power and love) in political violence; the third takes us to India and the politics of Maoist insurgency, focusing especially on the potential and pitfalls of acts of solidarity with the victims; the fourth zooms in on secular renditions of violence and the aesthetic repertoire they hail. The book ends with an Epilogue in which Malreddy ponders the morality of the insurgent fighting "small causes" (225) from peripheral locations. To this end, Malreddy mobilizes a figure assembled from different – culturally and geographically – body parts,

a “multicultural monster, a resurrected postcolonial corpse” (226) that can only mete out justice by undoing itself. The moral economy this curious assemblage embodies and creates speaks of the sacrifice indispensable to the appropriation of violent means by the wretched of the earth. Indeed, insurgent cultures are the cultures of this moral economy which the “nonstate combatants” (234) have at their disposal. The Epilogue emphasizes the glaring inadequacy of the received notions of *terrorism* and their rhetorical manoeuvres which erase the conditions in which a self-annihilating violence becomes the only viable choice the already violated can claim.

It is the last chapter, “Violent Worlds: Vernacular Agency in Middle Eastern Literature,” that offers the most conceptually and thematically provocative and inspiring insights and readings, in how it pursues the idea of “intrasecular sublime,” with which Malreddy aims to capture the shortcomings of the secular and to propose a non-Western concept of the sublime. The literary texts Malreddy examines – Yasmina Khadra’s *The Attack*, Kae Bahar’s *Letters from a Kurd*, Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer* – offer ingeniously crafted “insurgent figures” (219) whose project is to militate against their oppressors, often in volatile and incredible ways. Welding, in a somewhat paradoxical manner, the secular and the religious, the notion of intrasecular sublime captures the complexity of insurrectional struggle in the Middle East beyond simplistic equations of terrorism and religion. Unapologetically “local and vernacular” in their “world-making” imaginaries (185), these narratives offer stylistically novel ways to conceptualize communal revolt against systemic violence.

Guided by the idea of “the embodied resistance of the dead bodies” (192), Malreddy’s work joins the company of other outstanding projects which likewise seek to theorize the politics of dead and dying bodies, among them Banu Bargu’s *Disembodiment: Corporeal Politics of Radical Refusal*, Elsa Dorlin’s *Self-Defence: A Philosophy of Violence* and Eric Cazdyn’s *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture and Illness*. Malreddy’s take on this resistance implicitly challenges the prevalent (Western) conceptions of agency in which life and living, abled bodies are assumed to be the *sine qua non* of agential politics (any politics, for that matter). His readings of the selected texts meticulously unearth the ways they meddle with “the rational distinction between life and death” (200), thereby complicating the neat distinction between the two, a distinction which lies at the foundation of biopolitics and necropolitics. His reading of *The Corpse Washer*, in particular, foregrounds a different valuation of death than these two political frameworks allow, staging what he refers to as “ghostly insurgency against life” (199), a startling yet powerful intimacy with death and the dead. This intimacy, a major theme in the chapter, is mediated and embodied by a host of bizarre, improbable figures who link, inextricably, the aesthetic to the political, becoming agents of insurgency and of striking, strategic alliances.

An erudite study of Asian, African and Middle-Eastern literature, which features both well-known texts such as Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* and much less familiar ones such as Diti Sen's *Red Skies and Falling Stars* Malreddy's book is a rehabilitation of insurgency, as practice and theory, as life and death and as politics and ethics. It asks critical and relevant questions about what it means to be violent, for whom, under what circumstances and to what effects. His project constitutes an impressive endeavour to get at the aesthetics of the language of violence and its political consequences. Ultimately, *Insurgent Cultures* offers a critical reflection on what kinds of violence are left to those whose lives have already been violently terminated. Khaled, one of the protagonists from Hany Abu-Assad's film *Paradise Now* (2005) with which Malreddy opens the *Violent Worlds* chapter, captures succinctly this deadly, deathlike condition as he resorts to prolepsis to articulate the afterlife of violence: "In this life, we are already dead" (182).