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NARIVETTA AS NECROPOLITICAL CRITIQUE OF THE INDIAN STATE: SOVEREIGN POWER, UNGRIEVABLE LIVES, AND THE AESTHETICS OF ADIVASI RESISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

Anuraj Manohar's feature film Narivetta (2025) functions simultaneously as a work of cinema and as an act of political testimony. Drawing its narrative from the 2003 Muthanga tribal protest in Kerala—one of the most consequential and deliberately obscured episodes of state violence in postcolonial India—the film stages a rigorous cinematic interrogation of the Indian democratic state's relationship with its indigenous Adivasi communities. This paper argues that Narivetta constitutes a fully realized necropolitical critique: a sustained indictment of how the sovereign state exercises its ultimate power not merely to govern life, but to determine whose life may be extinguished and whose death may be erased. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics alongside Giorgio Agamben's conceptualization of bare life and the state of exception, and Judith Butler's framework of grievability, this analysis identifies four interconnected cinematic manifestations of necropolitical governance. These include the strategic transformation of the remote Wayanad forest into a permanent zone of exception; the construction of the Adivasi body as simultaneously hypervisible threat and constitutionally invisible citizen; the cold institutionalization of bureaucratic death-rationale through state agencies; and the deployment of development discourse as ideological cover for systemic land dispossession. The film further employs a distinctive set of subaltern aesthetics—handheld documentary realism, muted palettes of bare life, and the deliberate withholding of subtitles during tribal-dialect dialogue—to replicate, at the level of form, the very epistemic exclusion the narrative critiques at the level of content. By reframing Adivasi deaths as acts of political defiance rather than mere collateral damage, Narivetta constructs an essential counter-archive against the state's strategy of statistical denial and historical erasure, ensuring that the silenced dead of Muthanga are not merely mourned but remembered as agents of unfinished resistance.

Keywords: Necropolitics, Adivasi, Narivetta, State Violence, Bare Life, Grievability, Muthanga, Indian Cinema, Postcolonial Sovereignty, Subaltern Aesthetics

1. NARIVETTA AND THE CINEMATIC INDICTMENT OF STATE VIOLENCE

When a state kills, it rarely announces the fact. It reaches instead for language—for bureaucratic euphemism, administrative necessity, the cold diction of law and order—that converts lethal violence into procedural neutrality. This is, as Achille Mbembe (2003) observed, the grammar of necropolitical sovereignty: not the crude admission of dominion over death, but its careful management, its institutional dispersal, its narrative domestication. It is precisely this grammar that Narivetta, directed by Anuraj Manohar, sets out to decode and expose. Released in 2025 and grounded in the historical trauma of the 2003 Muthanga tribal protest in Kerala's Wayanad district, the film does not simply

dramatize a political event. It anatomizes the structural conditions that made such an event not only possible but, in a deeper sense, inevitable.

The Muthanga protest was not spontaneous combustion. It was the predictable conclusion of years of broken promises—most critically, the state government's failure to honor land rights guaranteed to the Adivasi community under an agreement signed in 2001. When indigenous families, led by the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha, finally moved to occupy the Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary in February 2003, they were not encroaching on foreign territory. They were returning to ancestral land the state had pledged and withheld. What they encountered was not negotiation but militarized force. The incident resulted in deaths the state has since struggled to contain narratively: the official record acknowledges one tribal man and one policeman killed, while Adivasi testimonies have consistently maintained that more of their dead were never officially counted, their bodies folded into the silence of a history the sovereign preferred to leave unwritten.

Narivetta begins with its title. In Malayalam, the word means jackal hunt, and this linguistic choice is not incidental. It establishes, from the outset, a hierarchical ontology: the state as hunter, the Adivasi as quarry. The frame is not merely metaphorical. In necropolitical governance, the dehumanization of targeted populations is a structural prerequisite—labeling the Wayanad protestors as "agitators," "encroachers," or "Naxalite sympathizers" precedes and licenses the violence directed against them. Naming them as pestilent or threatening transforms killing from a moral problem into a logical solution. The film understands this. By announcing its necropolitical logic through the very title, Narivetta invites its audience to recognize that what follows is not aberration but design.

2. THE THEORETICAL CENTRE: THE BODY AS POLITICAL OBJECT

At the heart of Narivetta's cinematic architecture is a compelling enactment of the central paradox of Adivasi political existence: the indigenous body is simultaneously invisible and hypervisible, irrelevant and threatening. In the routine operations of the welfare state—healthcare, education, political representation, land titling—the Adivasi is structurally absent. Their needs generate no urgent policy response; their deaths produce no political grief. Yet the moment they assert those needs through organized resistance, the state's gaze snaps into focus. They become visible, immediately and exclusively, as a threat to be neutralized.

This dual status—the oscillation between political invisibility and perceived dangerousness—is, as Mbembe (2003) argued, the signature condition of necropolitical subjects. Their existence is permitted only insofar as it does not disrupt the sovereign order; when it does, the sovereign's ultimate prerogative—the power to kill or to let die—is activated with institutional calm. Butler (2009) adds another dimension to this analysis. Grievability, she argues, is not a universal human right but a political allocation. Not all deaths are created equal in the eyes of the sovereign. Some lives are framed as worthy of grief, of public mourning, of media attention and legal accountability. Others are framed as already marginal, already expendable—their deaths, when they come, register not as tragedies but as regrettable administrative outcomes.

The Muthanga incident makes this asymmetry visible in a manner that is almost too stark to require theoretical elaboration. The death of the policeman—the representative of sovereign order—was publicly mourned, officially documented, institutionally honored. The deaths of tribal community members, by contrast, were minimized, disputed, and in some cases simply denied. The body of the state's functionary was grievable. The bodies of those who challenged the state were not. Narivetta takes this structural asymmetry as its central subject, refusing to replicate the sovereign's hierarchy of grief and insisting instead on the political weight of each unacknowledged death.

3. RESEARCH QUESTION AND SCOPE

This paper examines how Narivetta deploys its cinematic apparatus—narrative structure, characterization, spatial logic, and aesthetic strategy—to critique the necropolitical operations of the Indian democratic state in the specific context of indigenous land rights and systematic dispossession. The analysis is organized around four primary cinematic manifestations of necropolitical governance identified in the film: the spatialization of the state of exception, the paradox of indigenous hypervisibility and invisibility, the bureaucratic rationality of institutionalized death, and the ideological weaponization of development discourse. It further examines the film's subaltern aesthetic strategies and positions its critique within a broader global cartography of necropower. The paper argues that Narivetta is not merely a political film but an act of counter-archival scholarship—a cinematic intervention in the official historical record that the sovereign has worked methodically to suppress.

4. FROM THE ADMINISTRATION OF LIFE TO THE ADMINISTRATION OF DEATH

Michel Foucault's (1978) concept of biopolitics offered a decisive reorientation in how scholars understand the operations of modern power. For Foucault, power in the modern era does not primarily express itself through sovereign prohibition—through the spectacular, theatrical assertion of the ruler's right to take life. Rather, it works through the administration of life itself: through population management, public health, demographic calculation, and the institutional optimization of human vitality. Power, in this formulation, is productive. It manages, sorts, enhances, and distributes life-chances across a population. The sovereign's ancient right to kill recedes into the background; in its place emerges the modern state's more pervasive and intimate project of governing the living.

Mbembe's (2003) intervention begins precisely where Foucault's analysis reaches its limit. While Foucault offers an indispensable account of how modern power operates through the optimization of life, Mbembe argues that this framework cannot adequately account for the political reality of postcolonial and neoliberal states, where sovereignty is exercised not through the administration of life but through the organized determination of death. Necropolitics, in Mbembe's formulation, names the political logic by which certain populations are assigned to what he calls "death-worlds"—social conditions characterized by endemic precarity, systematic neglect, and perpetual exposure to lethal force. The question for the necropolitical sovereign is not how to optimize the life of a population but which populations may be permitted to live and which must be consigned to conditions indistinguishable from dying.

What makes Narivetta particularly sophisticated as a critical text is its insistence that these two logics—biopolitical and necropolitical—are not mutually exclusive but strategically intertwined. The Kerala state does not abandon the language of biopolitics when it confronts the Adivasi. It deploys that language—the rhetoric of ecological preservation, regional development, and the optimization of forest resources—precisely as an ideological cover for necropolitical action. The Adivasi are dispossessed in the name of a greater, biopolitical good: the conservation of wildlife, the promotion of eco-tourism, the development of the regional economy. This maneuver, in which biopolitical rhetoric is pressed into the service of necropolitical outcomes, is what allows the state to present the death and displacement of indigenous communities as regrettable but rational—as the tragic but necessary cost of progress.

5. THE STATE OF EXCEPTION AND BARE LIFE

Giorgio Agamben's (1998) theoretical contribution to this framework centers on two interconnected concepts: bare life and the state of exception. Bare life—the life of homo sacer, the sacred man of Roman law who could be killed without legal consequence—describes a form of human existence from which all political and legal protections have been stripped. The individual reduced to bare life is not outside the law in the simple sense of being lawless; rather, they occupy a more troubling position in which law acknowledges their existence only to exclude them from its protection. They are included, paradoxically, through their exclusion—visible to the political order precisely as those who cannot claim its guarantees.

The state of exception, Agamben (1998) argues, is the structural mechanism through which this exposure is produced and maintained. When the sovereign suspends the normal operation of law—declaring an emergency, designating a space as exceptional, identifying a population as a threat requiring extraordinary measures—it creates zones in which bare life is manufactured at scale. What is crucial in Agamben's analysis, and what Narivetta dramatizes with particular force, is that the state of exception in postcolonial contexts is not temporary. It does not describe a crisis that will eventually be resolved and a return to constitutional normalcy. For the Adivasi communities of Wayanad, the state of exception is the norm. The suspension of their rights—the denial of their land, the criminalization of their protest, the militarization of their living space—is not emergency governance. It is the regular, institutionalized form of governance applied to them. The binary between legal protection and lawless violence has, for them, already collapsed.

6. GRIEVABILITY AND THE POLITICAL DISTRIBUTION OF MOURNING

Butler's (2009) concept of grievability provides the affective and cultural dimension that completes this theoretical architecture. Grievability, Butler argues, is not simply the capacity for grief as a human emotion but a political determination about which lives matter enough to be mourned. The necropolitical state operates, at the level of culture and representation, by producing ungrievable lives: lives whose loss generates no public mourning, no political

accountability, no media outrage. The systematic destruction of such lives is rendered not tragic but inevitable—the natural outcome of their own precarity, their own failures, their own position outside the circle of the truly human.

Butler (2009) argues that the ungrievable are not those who are simply unknown. They are actively produced as ungrievable through media framing, official documentation, and the political grammar in which some deaths are described as murders and others as casualties of circumstance. The selective reporting of the Muthanga casualties—where the policeman's death generated institutional mourning and the unacknowledged tribal deaths generated official silence—is a precise enactment of this necropolitical mechanism. The film's insistence on restoring visibility to these unacknowledged deaths is, therefore, not merely an act of historical correction. It is an act of political resistance against the sovereign's capacity to determine who may be mourned.

7. DEATH-WORLDS, SLOW VIOLENCE, AND THE STRUCTURE OF ACCUMULATED HARM

Mbembe (2003) characterizes the outcome of sustained necropolitical governance as the creation of what he calls "death-worlds"—social conditions in which populations are subjected to a systematic attrition of life-chances that renders them, in effect, the living dead. These death-worlds are maintained not only through spectacular acts of lethal force—police bullets, military operations—but through the chronic, cumulative, often invisible processes that Rob Nixon (2011) has theorized as slow violence: the gradual deterioration of environment, the structural denial of healthcare and education, the legal delays and bureaucratic deferrals that erode, incrementally and inexorably, the capacity of marginalized communities to survive and resist.

The years between the 2001 land agreement and the 2003 Muthanga protest constitute precisely such a period of slow violence. The state's failure to honor its legal commitments was not passive oversight; it was an active mechanism of attrition, designed—or at least functioning—to weaken the Adivasi community's political capacity to demand what had been promised. By 2003, when the protest finally erupted, it did so not out of impulsive militancy but out of exhaustion: the exhaustion of communities that had waited, petitioned, negotiated, and been repeatedly ignored. The lethal state response was, in this sense, the acute culmination of a prolonged, structural slow violence. Narivetta understands this temporal depth and insists on staging it cinematically, refusing to allow the violence of a single day to be understood in isolation from the years of quiet structural devastation that preceded it.

8. THE GENESIS OF RESISTANCE AND THE GEOMETRY OF BROKEN PROMISES

To understand Narivetta is, first, to understand Muthanga—not as an incident but as an accumulation. On February 19, 2003, the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha, under the leadership of C. K. Janu and M. Geethanandan, began an occupation of the Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary in Wayanad district. The occupation was structured as a demand: the implementation of land rights the state had formally agreed to deliver under the 2001 settlement between the AGMS and the Kerala government. Those rights had not been delivered. They had been promised, documented, and then quietly allowed to expire in the corridors of administrative delay. The protest, from its inception, was not agitation but insistence—the insistence of communities who had chosen to believe, one final time, in the procedural legitimacy of the state they were petitioning.

The response of the state to this insistence was not negotiation. On February 19, 2003, after weeks of occupation, police and paramilitary forces moved on the protest site. The resulting violence left, in official records, two dead: one tribal man and one police officer. Adivasi testimonies have consistently, insistently, maintained that this number is false—that more community members were killed, their bodies removed, their deaths unregistered. This dispute over the dead is not merely a factual disagreement. It is a contest over the political reality of what happened at Muthanga: whether the state committed what the law might recognize as mass violence against its own citizens, or whether it conducted what it characterized as a proportionate law-and-order operation against criminal encroachers.

9. THE STATE'S NECROPOLITICAL JUSTIFICATION

The rhetorical aftermath of Muthanga is as revealing as the event itself. The state's official framing was immediate and consistent: the operation was a law-and-order response to illegal occupation of a protected forest area. This framing accomplished several things simultaneously. It stripped the protest of its political dimension—reducing a demand for constitutional rights to a criminal act. It repositioned the Adivasi community from aggrieved citizens exercising

legitimate pressure to lawbreakers requiring enforcement. It insulated the state's lethal response from moral scrutiny by locating it within the neutral, procedural language of regulatory compliance. And it rendered the question of the unacknowledged dead moot: if the operation was merely a law-and-order matter, its casualties were administrative data, not political facts.

The suppression of the actual casualty count deserves particular attention. The necropolitical state does not merely kill; it controls the grammar in which killing is described. By maintaining official silence about additional Adivasi deaths, the state accomplished a form of double violence: the lethal violence of the operation itself, and the archival violence of its erasure. To deny the existence of bodies is to deny the scale of sovereign action; to minimize the casualty count is to reduce legal and moral exposure. Statistical denial is, in this sense, a necropolitical instrument. Narivetta's decision to restage this violence—to render it visible, audible, and cinematically unavoidable—is its fundamental counter-archival act. The film refuses the state's grammar and insists on a different accounting of the dead.

10. ANALYSIS: THE NECROPOLITICAL TOPOGRAPHY OF NARIVETTA

Narivetta translates the historical reality of Muthanga into a coherent and theoretically rich cinematic critique through a series of specific narrative, spatial, and aesthetic choices. The analysis below is organized around four primary cinematic manifestations of necropolitical governance that the film constructs and sustains.

11. THE FOREST AS A ZONE OF EXCEPTION: WEAPONIZING CONSERVATION

The choice to set Narivetta in the remote forest region of Wayanad is not a neutral geographical decision. It is a deliberate spatialization of necropower. The forest in the film functions, from its earliest sequences, as what Agamben (1998) would recognize as a zone of exception: a space in which the normal operation of constitutional guarantees is suspended, in which law and unregulated violence become indistinguishable, and in which the state's lethal prerogative can be exercised without procedural constraint. What makes the film's treatment of this spatial logic particularly sharp is its insistence that this suspension of rights is not an emergency measure but a chronic condition. For the Adivasi communities of Wayanad, the state of exception is the permanent structure of their political existence.

The instrument through which the zone of exception is legally produced and maintained is conservation. The state's invocation of forest protection, wildlife preservation, and ecological sustainability as grounds for denying indigenous land claims represents a sophisticated deployment of biopolitical rhetoric in the service of necropolitical outcomes. Environmental protection is, in principle, a biopolitical good: it serves the long-term interests of a population's health, livelihood, and ecological survival. But as Narivetta shows, when conservation is wielded against the very communities most intimately dependent on the land being conserved, it ceases to function as a biopolitical instrument and becomes instead a tool of internal colonization. An animacy hierarchy—in Mel Chen's (2014) formulation—is produced in which the non-human life of the forest (its wildlife, its timber, its tourism potential) is valued above the life of its indigenous inhabitants. The Adivasi are rendered less than nature, and nature is rendered an alibi for their dispossession.

12. THE INDIGENOUS BODY AS UNGRIEVABLE: HYPERVISIBILITY AS A THREAT

The Adivasi community in Narivetta inhabits what is perhaps the most disorienting of all necropolitical conditions: simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility. This is not a paradox the film merely gestures toward; it constructs it carefully across its narrative arc. In the registers of welfare, representation, and political recognition—in all the domains where the biopolitical state is supposed to administer the flourishing of its population—the Adivasi simply do not appear. Their healthcare deficits generate no ministerial urgency. Their land dispossession produces no legislative response. Their political voice finds no institutional amplification. In these registers, they are structurally absent: not included in the sphere of grievable citizenship because they were never fully granted entry to it. Yet the moment resistance emerges—the moment the protest camp is established in the Muthanga sanctuary—the state's attention is immediate, total, and militarized. The Adivasi become hypervisible, but only as a threat. They are labeled by state media and security agencies as agitators, Naxalite sympathizers, criminal encroachers: a vocabulary that accomplishes, in the discursive register, what the law-and-order operation accomplishes in the physical register. The labeling strips the protest of its political legitimacy and positions the sovereign's lethal response as proportionate and necessary. This is the mechanism Butler (2009) describes: the production of ungrievable lives through discursive framing. When the deaths at Muthanga

occur, they are absorbed into a narrative that has already determined their insignificance. They are not murders; they are outcomes. They are not tragedies; they are administrative results. The community that demanded land and was met with bullets is rendered, in the official grammar, as the author of its own destruction.

13. THE BUREAUCRATIC RATIONALITY OF DEATH: STATE ACTORS AS NECRO-EXECUTORS

Narivetta is politically sophisticated in its refusal to locate necropolitical violence in the individual psychology of its antagonists. DIG Raghuram Keshavadas, the senior police official who commands the Muthanga operation, is not depicted as a sadist or a bigot. He is depicted as something more troubling: a competent, rational bureaucrat who has internalized the institutional logic of his position with such thoroughness that he can authorize lethal violence against unarmed protesters without apparent moral conflict. This is the portrait of what Hannah Arendt, in a different but resonant context, called the banality of evil: the capacity of ordinary, even conscientious, institutional actors to participate in or enable atrocity precisely because they have thoroughly sublimated moral judgment to procedural compliance.

In the film's rendering, Keshavadas embodies what might be termed the bureaucratic rationality of death. Political dissent—the legitimate Adivasi demand for land justice—is processed through his administrative apparatus and emerges, reclassified, as a quantifiable threat to order requiring a proportionate enforcement response. The transformation is not cynical in any obvious sense; it is systemic. The institutional machinery of the necropolitical state does not require individual malice to function. It requires only that its actors inhabit their roles completely—that they understand their mandate as the maintenance of order rather than the protection of persons, and that they treat indigenous lives as variables in an enforcement calculation rather than as constitutional realities demanding political response.

The character arc of Constable Peter Varghese operates, within this frame, as a study in institutional capture. Initially positioned as a figure of genuine moral ambiguity—sympathetic, perhaps, to the communities he has been deployed against—Varghese is gradually absorbed into the necropolitical machinery. His inner conflict is not resolved through moral courage but eroded by institutional pressure. He witnesses atrocity and does not intervene; he participates in the silencing of what he has seen. The film is careful not to present his complicity as moral cowardice in the conventional sense. It presents it as the normal operation of a system designed to convert individuals with ethical capacities into functionaries of lethal institutional procedure.

14. DEVELOPMENT, DISPOSSESSION, AND THE LANGUAGE OF CALIBRATED DEATH

Perhaps the most ideologically revealing dimension of Narivetta's critique concerns the state's use of development discourse as a mechanism for converting theft into progress. The government's proposals for eco-tourism, wildlife conservation, and infrastructural investment in the Wayanad region are not incidental to the conflict over land; they are its ideological engine. They accomplish the transformation of a political dispute about ancestral rights into a technocratic discussion about growth models—a discussion from which the Adivasi are excluded by design, since their claims are, by definition, obstacles to the development that the state has already determined to be in the general interest.

The film's most pointed intervention in this ideological terrain is its sustained attention to the distinction between resettlement and restoration. The state offers resettlement: a managed relocation to designated areas, a solution that is, from the sovereign's perspective, generous and pragmatic. The Adivasi community rejects this offer not out of stubbornness but out of clarity. Resettlement is not equivalent to restoration. Resettlement is a spatial reorganization that severs communities from ancestral land, from the ecological knowledge embedded in specific territories, from the cultural and spiritual frameworks that derive from particular places. Restoration—the return of what was taken—is what the 2001 agreement promised and the state withheld. The distinction is not semantic; it is the difference between a solution that addresses the state's administrative problem and one that addresses the community's political reality.

The state's lethal response to the protest reveals the necropolitical logic that underlies the development rhetoric. When resettlement is refused—when the political demand for restoration is pressed with enough force to constitute a genuine challenge to sovereign authority over land—the response is calibrated death. The deployment of armed force to suppress the Muthanga occupation demonstrates that the state's commitment to development extends to the level of violence when indigenous assertion threatens the territorial arrangements on which that development depends.

Narivetta stages this with unflinching clarity: the bullets at Muthanga were not a failure of governance but an expression of its fundamental priorities.

15. SUBALTERN AESTHETICS: ARTICULATION AND THE POLITICS OF EPISTEMIC DISTANCE

Narivetta does not merely argue its critique in narrative terms. It enacts it formally—through a set of aesthetic choices that function not as stylistic decoration but as structural components of the political argument the film is making. These choices constitute what might be called a subaltern aesthetics: a mode of filmmaking that insists on the political weight of form, and that understands the question of who gets to see and hear as inseparable from the question of who gets to live and die.

The most immediately legible of these choices is the use of handheld camera work during the protest and crackdown sequences. The kinetic instability of the handheld camera—its inability to hold a composed, authoritative frame—serves multiple functions. It dissolves the aesthetic distance between viewer and event, collapsing the comfortable position of the spectator who watches violence from the safety of representational order. It lends the sequences a documentary credibility that resists the aestheticization of suffering; what we see does not look like cinema's managed representation of conflict but like the disorienting, uncontrollable reality of violence in progress. And it positions the camera not as the neutral eye of sovereign surveillance—recording events from a position of stable, institutional authority—but as a vulnerable, mobile presence embedded in the chaos it records.

The film's visual palette—muted, earthen, systematically drained of the vivid color that commercial cinema conventionally deploys to signal significance and vitality—functions as a sustained visual argument about the condition of bare life. Color, in this palette, has been exhausted. The visual world of the Adivasi community is one from which chromatic abundance has been stripped: not through any dramatic, single act of deprivation, but through the chronic, incremental attrition of lives lived at the structural margins of what the state considers worth investing in. The earth tones and muted greens of the forest setting do not romanticize indigenous closeness to nature; they register, with precision, the aesthetic signature of slow violence.

Perhaps the film's most intellectually sophisticated aesthetic gesture is its strategic deployment of untranslated tribal dialogue. At specific narrative junctures—moments of political assembly, of communal deliberation, of the most intimate expressions of Adivasi political consciousness—the film presents dialogue in tribal languages without subtitles. This is not an oversight and not, primarily, an act of documentary authenticity. It is a structural argument. The mainstream audience—the viewer positioned, by default, as the normative spectator of Kerala's dominant cultural production—is excluded from direct comprehension. They experience, at the level of form, the epistemic exclusion that the Adivasi experience at the level of political life. The state has systematically failed to understand, engage with, or incorporate tribal epistemologies into its governance frameworks; the film replicates this failure, momentarily, in its viewer. The discomfort of incomprehension is made to function as a productive political encounter, an experience that insists on the reality of what the dominant order does not know and does not try to know.

16. THE RIGHT TO DIE RESISTING: CHALLENGING THE NECROPOLITICAL ERASURE OFAGENCY

One of Narivetta's most radical and carefully sustained arguments concerns the political meaning of indigenous death in the context of resistance. The film refuses, with considerable deliberateness, to position the Adivasi casualties as victims in the conventional sense: as passive recipients of state violence whose death confirms their political powerlessness. Instead, it frames their deaths as acts of political assertion—as the ultimate expression of a community's insistence on existing on its own terms, within its own territory, within the framework of rights the state had formally acknowledged and then betrayed.

This reframing has significant theoretical implications. In the necropolitical framework, the sovereign's power to administer death depends on its capacity to render that death meaningless—to strip it of political weight, to prevent it from generating grief, solidarity, or historical memory. When the Adivasi dead of Muthanga are framed as agitators killed in a law-and-order operation, their deaths are domesticated into the sovereign's narrative of legitimate force. Narivetta refuses this domestication. By restaging the deaths as defiant political acts—as the deaths of people who knew what they were risking and chose to press their claim regardless—the film transforms them from administrative data into historical events that demand political reckoning.

The Muthanga forest becomes, in this reframing, not only a site of state violence but a theatre of ongoing resistance. The dead are not simply memorialized; they are positioned as participants in a political struggle that did not end with their deaths. This is the community's assertion of counter-sovereignty over its own narrative—an insistence that the power to define the meaning of Adivasi life and death does not belong exclusively to the sovereign. By reclaiming grievability within the subaltern sphere, the film actively resists the necropolitical state's most fundamental operation: its capacity to determine whose deaths matter.

17. NARIVETTA AND THE GLOBAL CARTOGRAPHY OF NECROPOWER

Narivetta's most durable contribution may be its insistence that what happened at Muthanga is not an anomaly within Indian democratic governance but a regional instance of a global political structure. The film positions the Muthanga protest not as a failure of the Kerala state's particular commitment to its indigenous communities but as a manifestation of the necropolitical logic that governs the relationship between sovereign states and their most marginalized populations across multiple national and historical contexts.

Within the Indian context, the film's critique intersects with the work of films like Fandry, which exposes how caste functions as a necropolitical structure—exposing Dalit communities to violence, hazardous labor, and symbolic death as the normalized conditions of their social existence. The Adivasi's experience in Narivetta also resonates with the precarity documented in films like Goat Days and Gaddama, whose migrant protagonists are rendered bare life in legal and spatial limbo, perpetually vulnerable to exploitation and abandonment. The structural parallel is precise: in each case, a population exists in a zone where the law's protection is unavailable and the sovereign's violence is unchecked.

Globally, Narivetta's critique connects to a broader cartography of necropower that includes the differential treatment of populations in wartime (where some civilian deaths generate international outrage and others generate silence), the management of migrant and refugee populations in detention systems that function as permanent states of exception, and the differential allocation of medical resources during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed, with unusual clarity, the extent to which life-chance remains unevenly distributed along lines of race, class, and geography. In each of these contexts, the fundamental necropolitical logic is the same: certain populations are positioned, by structural arrangement, as those whose deaths are manageable, whose lives are expendable, and whose grief is not the political community's obligation to acknowledge.

18. CONCLUSION: REAFFIRMING THE NECROPOLITICAL INDICTMENT

Narivetta is, finally, a film about the distance between constitutional promise and sovereign practice. It does not argue that Indian democracy is illusory; it argues, with considerably more precision, that democracy coexists with necropolitics—that the constitutional guarantee of rights and the systematic denial of those rights to specific populations are not contradictions but structural features of a governance apparatus that reserves its full protections for those whose lives it has already determined to be grievable. The film does not make this argument abstractly. It makes it through the bodies of the Muthanga dead, through the cold calculus of DIG Keshavadas, through the forest that is preserved for wildlife and foreclosed to its human inhabitants, through the land agreement that was signed and forgotten, through the bullets that answered a demand for what the law had already promised.

The four cinematic manifestations of necropolitical governance identified in this analysis—the spatialization of the state of exception, the paradox of indigenous hypervisibility and invisibility, the bureaucratic rationality of institutionalized death, and the ideological weaponization of development discourse—collectively constitute a comprehensive and theoretically grounded account of how sovereign power operates against its most marginalized citizens. They demonstrate, through a specific historical and geographic case, the more general argument that Mbembe (2003), Agamben (1998), and Butler (2009) have made from different theoretical vantages: that the modern state's relationship to its most expendable populations is defined not by neglect alone but by the active, institutionalized administration of their exposure to death. Kumari (2026)

The aesthetic strategies of Narivetta—its documentary realism, its subaltern palette, its deployment of epistemic distance through untranslated dialogue—ensure that the film's political argument is not merely apprehended intellectually but experienced structurally. The viewer cannot remain at a safe aesthetic distance from the violence being represented, because the film has made the production of that distance—the comfortable, well-lit position from which the mainstream audience typically regards indigenous suffering—part of what it is interrogating. This is not a minor

formal achievement. It is the condition for the film's deepest political effect: the transformation of passive spectatorship into a form of complicit encounter with the structures that produce ungrievable lives.

By choosing to restage the Muthanga violence—to render it in the fully embodied, temporally immersive medium of cinema—Narivetta accomplishes something that historical documentation and political journalism, for all their essential importance, cannot accomplish in the same way. It insists on the presence of the dead. It refuses the statistical abstraction that official records deploy to manage the scale of sovereign violence. It forces the Muthanga dead back into the political imagination of a society that has been encouraged, by every institutional mechanism at the state's disposal, to forget them.

This insistence on the presence of the dead raises questions that no democracy committed to its own foundational principles can indefinitely defer: Whose lives fall within the circle of constitutional protection? Who possesses the authority to determine which deaths constitute political losses requiring accountability, and which constitute administrative outcomes requiring only management? What is the ethical cost—and the democratic cost—when the institutions established to protect persons become, systematically and with bureaucratic precision, the instruments of their destruction? Narivetta does not answer these questions. It ensures, with the force of cinema at its most purposeful, that they cannot be easily avoided. In doing so, it transforms the tragedy of Muthanga from an episode in the administrative history of a regional government into an enduring indictment—and an enduring call to account.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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