

## POETRY AS RESISTANCE: AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POEMS BY RICHARD DE ZOYSA IN THE LIGHT OF BARE LIFE

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**ABSTRACT:** This study analyses selected poems by Richard de Zoysa through the theoretical framework of 'bare life,' put forth by Giorgio Agamben. It examines how political violence and sovereign power operate through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in Sri Lanka's late 20th century socio-political context. Focusing on four poems, 'Apocalypse Soon,' 'Rites of Passage,' 'Gajagavannama,' and 'Animal Crackers' this study examines how de Zoysa's poetry testifies political violence, ethnic conflict, and state repression. The analysis reveals four major insights: first, minority communities are depicted as excluded from political and legal protection, reflecting their reduction to bare life; second, the poems expose how sovereign power suspends law and normalises extra-legal violence in a perpetual state of exception; third, the recurring animal imagery destabilises the human-animal divide, symbolising dehumanisation and complicity in violence; and finally, the tension between bios and zoē underscores the fragility of human existence under sovereign rule. By extending Agamben's framework of bare life to the underexplored field of Sri Lankan anglophone poetry, this study addresses a significant research gap and positions de Zoysa's work as a powerful literary expression of resistance. In doing so, it contributes to debates in political philosophy, biopolitics, and the role of literature as testimony under authoritarian rule.

*Keywords:* bare life, Giorgio Agamben, political violence, Richard de Zoysa, state of exception

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

In socio-political fabrics that are stained with state violence and civil unrest, poetry is often woven in resistance to injustice and political erasure. In Sri Lanka's fraught political landscape in the 1980s, Richard de Zoysa emerged as a prominent figure whose work was a black banner of protest. His poetry, deeply personal and overtly political, brings forth the harsh realities of state-instigated violence, racial conflicts, and political and social injustice. This study examines selected poetry of de Zoysa through the conceptual lens of 'bare life,' coined by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998), which describes a form of life stripped of political rights and reduced to mere biological existence, a subject to violence and excluded from legal protection. Agamben's theory of bare life draws on the Roman legal figure 'homo sacer,' an individual who may be killed but not sacrificed. He applies this to modern forms of sovereign power, where individuals or groups are placed outside the legal protection. In this 'state of exception,' the sovereign decides who qualifies as politically valuable (bios) and who becomes expendable (zoē). This distinction is crucial in understanding how authoritarian regimes sustain power through the policy of 'divide and rule,' by eliminating perceived threats through legal ostracize. The selected poems of de Zoysa offer a poignant literary reflection on these political injustices, transforming poetic expression into a powerful form of testimony and confrontation. The following review considers scholarship on bare life and critical studies of de Zoysa to position this study within a critical landscape. Chare (2006) explores bare life through Holocaust

literature, highlighting how trauma strips individuals of political identity, reducing them to a mere biological existence. Owens (2014) states that refugees who are culturally uprooted and geographically displaced exist in liminal legal spaces, under sovereign control. Polychroniou (2025) discusses post-9/11 surveillance literature, exposing how the state of exception becomes normalized, turning entire populations into subjects of suspicion and control. The poetry of Richard de Zoysa is lauded for its political critique and vivid depiction of violence and social unrest in Sri Lanka during the 1980s (Arivarasy, 2016). Zoysa's use of powerful imagery and direct language, which exposes abuse of power and challenges government oppression, are often critically appraised (Perera, 2024). His poetry collection, 'This Other Eden' remains pivotal in Sri Lankan English literature for its unwavering thematic engagement with issues of identity, conflict, and justice (Wijesinha, 1990). Perera (2024) also recognizes de Zoysa's voice as emblematic of resistance in Sri Lankan poetry. While Agambenian theory has gained traction in global literary analysis, its application to Sri Lankan anglophone poetry, remains underexplored, specifically, in critical evaluations of how bare life is operated in a backdrop of state-instigated violence. Through this study, it is aimed to address this gap by analysing selected poems by Richard de Zoysa, seeking to contribute to the fields of Agambenian theoretical studies and the broader discourse on poetry as a medium of political witness and resistance.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The study employed a thematic analysis of Richard de Zoysa's selected poetry, guided by Giorgio Agamben's theoretical formulation of bare life. The texts were close read to identify recurrent images, motifs, and rhetorical strategies that foreground the precariousness of life under political violence. Indications of political and legal exclusion and dehumanization were specially noted. These textual observations were initially coded under conceptual categories consistent with Agamben's framework. Then the codes were refined into thematic strands that captured de Zoysa's negotiations with political violence and vulnerability. The major themes identified were: the exclusion of individuals from political and legal recognition, the suspension of law and the operations of sovereign power, the collapse of the human-animal distinction and the tension between bios and zoē. These themes were re-evaluated against the poems to ensure their analytical validity and then situated within the socio-political climate of Sri Lanka in the 1980s. The poems 'Apocalypse Soon,' 'Animal Crackers,' 'Gajagavannama,' and 'Rites of Passage' were selected due to their explicit engagement with state repression, ethnic violence, and political exclusion, making them conducive to read through Agamben's theoretical lens. Moreover, read against the backdrop of his own abduction and assassination in 1990, they acquire poignancy as texts that embody the very condition of bare life. Thus, the selection ensures that the analysis addresses the thematic gravity of de Zoysa's poetry and its contribution to the underexplored intersection of Sri Lankan anglophone literature with Agambenian thought.

### **3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1 Exclusion in Politics**

Through his poetry, de Zoysa reflects how Sri Lanka's political power structures systematically exclude certain ethnic groups from full citizenship, reducing them to a state of vulnerability akin to Agamben's concept of bare life. *Animal Crackers*, which is a direct reference to the ethnic violence episode of 1983 Black July riots, encapsulates how Tamil minorities were violently excluded from security, exposed to state-sanctioned violence, and stripped of their right to live. This indicates how a group of people is reduced to bios in times of curated crisis. The Sinhalese are depicted as easily manipulatable and thus becoming puppets or destructive arms of political agendas. Hence, it is seen that the people are kept at binaries of humanity versus nationality by the sovereign for its own benefit.

Similarly, *Apocalypse Soon* metaphorically frames racial strife as an impending catastrophe, the "fifth horseman," mirroring how ordinary citizens are caught in the crossfire of exclusionary, pretentiously nationalist politics. The poem reflects the alienation and segregation of individuals who find themselves outside the protective inclusion of the state, underscoring the fragility of people during times of crisis. Thus, the poem reflects how people become victims of political propaganda in a (seemingly) democratic state despite the racial differences, becoming politically expendable.

#### **3.2 Sovereignty and State of Exception**

The selected poems also resonate with Agamben's notion of the state of exception, where sovereign power suspends legal protections and exerts control through extra-legal violence such as para-military forces. In *Rites of Passage* and *Gajagavannama*, the poet reflects on the rituals and narratives that challenge sovereign authority. The poems interrogate how the state's exceptional measures, such as enforced disappearances and political violence, embroider a tapestry of a society where citizens live in perpetual fear as their fundamental rights are suspended. The paradox of sovereignty as protector and violator, deciding who is included within the frame of law and who is excluded is well evident through the two poems. *Animal Crackers* further illustrates this by depicting the aftermath of sanctioned political violence, leaving victims caught in a liminal space of legal invisibility and vulnerability. This mirrors Agamben's concept of the "camp," where law is suspended.

#### **3.3 Human-Animal Distinction and Nature of Life**

The fragility of humanity amidst political violence and social upheaval is evident in the poetic expressions of de Zoysa, blurring the distinction between humans and animals. This is clearly seen in *Animal Crackers*, which metaphorically evokes the dehumanization of the Tamil community and the animalisation of the Sinhalese community, during the 1983 Black July riots. The title of the poem itself alludes to animals, symbolizing how humans are reduced to primal, vulnerable states under manipulative political forces.

Similarly, '*Gajagavannama*,' in which the elephant is a metaphor for a leading political party and its leader at the time, invokes the natural and instinctual forces that are capable of destruction.

The poet's employment of such imagery gestures toward the porous boundary between human and animal nature, problematising the hierarchical separation suggesting shared vulnerability and moral blindness. Here, the human-animal distinction collapses as individuals become mere biological entities who are either victimizer or victim of violence and fear, stripped of political agency, awareness, and dignity.

### 3.4 Tension between Bios and Zoē

In 'Apocalypse Soon' and 'Rites of Passage,' the writer confronts the imminence of destruction and transformation, themes that align with the tension between bios and zoē. The poems reflect a life caught between political violence and personal identity, where the collapse of the social order exposes the raw biological reality of survival. The 'Rites of Passage' allegorically represent transitions in the poetic persona and the collective experience of Sri Lankan citizens, where life is precariously balanced between political recognition and bare existence.

## 4 CONCLUSION

On a concluding note, it is seen that Richard de Zoysa's poems, *Apocalypse Soon*, *Rites of Passage*, *Gajagavannama*, and *Animal Crackers*, offer a profound meditation on the fragile boundary between human and animal life, illuminating the binary nature of existence under conditions of political violence and social upheaval. His work challenges the rigid separation between bios and zoe, revealing life as an interplay between mere survival and political recognition. Through vivid imagery and symbolic narratives, de Zoysa exposes how individuals are often reduced to bare life, stripped of political agency and dignity, echoing Giorgio Agamben's exploration of the precariousness of life within the 'state of exception.' Ultimately, the poems not only reflect the turbulent socio-political realities of Sri Lanka but also invite readers to re-evaluate the essence of humanity and ethical values when confronted with exclusion, violence, and human rights violations. Ultimately, the exploration of the collapse of the human-animal divide enriches biopolitical scholarship with culturally specific insights drawn from Sri Lanka's history of ethnic conflict and political repression. Moreover, the analysis situates de Zoysa within literature of resistance while acknowledging the personal and biographical resonance of his fate as a victim of sovereign abandonment. These contributions highlight the significance of de Zoysa's work as a vital intervention in South Asian literary studies and in broader debates on power, violence, and the fragility of life under state repression.

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