

# Imagining beyond religion and secularism: *The postsecular imagination*

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*Manav Ratti*

**The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature**

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Manav Ratti's *The Postsecular Imagination* presents a nuanced analysis of how literature is capable of generating new ways of interpreting the limits of religion and secularism through the rather slippery notion of postsecularism. Literature, he argues, is uniquely positioned to dismantle the ideologies of secularism and religion opening an array of possibilities that neither fully abandon nor fully embrace religion and secularism. The Introduction draws from a number of theorists to explore the various debates connected to secularism and its supposed connections to modernity and the nation-state. Ratti explores the potential role of secularism as an ideology employed to construct religious individuals as irrational pre-modern 'others' in relation to the rational modern apparatus of the secular state. Of particular interest to Ratti is the position of religious minorities in such a situation. Another recurring theme in the book presented in the introduction is the relationship between aesthetics and the postsecular. If the secular age is characterized as an age of disenchantment, Ratti argues that the postsecular found in literature opens an avenue for a re-enchantment through aesthetics. The introduction also presents a discussion on what the 'post' in postsecularism means. Ratti emphasizes that postsecularism is neither a return to religion nor a rejection of secularism, rather it is a negotiated term that acknowledges the difficulties with such binary constructions allowing for new combinations that can arise in diasporic and multi-religious contexts.

The first chapter explores Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. Ratti argues that the novel is an experiment in undermining notions of national, ethnic and religious differences through the love, friendship and service to one another that the characters in the novel develop. He argues the characters in the novel demonstrate that the postsecular is not devoid of religion or secularism; rather, the characters foster a community with its own epistemologies devoid of the constructions of the nation-state. Ratti also develops his theory of aestheticism in this chapter as does he discuss the impact of Ondaatje's diasporic context on the novel.

The second chapter explores the status of minority religious traditions in India through Allan Sealy's *The Everest Hotel*. Ratti argues that Sealy uses the Anglo-

Indian status of some of his characters to challenge notions of 'pure' forms of Christianity and Hinduism. The novel, argues Ratti, asks us to reimagine India not as a purely Hindu state, but as a diverse and hybrid place. The third chapter addresses Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. Here the author argues that Ondaatje uses discourses of human rights to generate ethical and political responses to Sri Lanka. The novel also demonstrates how secular discourses within a particular nation-state context can breakdown. Ratti argues that Ondaatje challenges the authority of the state and its abstracting voice in a process he terms the semioethical: through a representation of the law in literature a moment of witnessing occurs that particularizes and personalizes the impact of the law in a way that confronts the claims of the law's abstract homogeneity. The postsecular attributes Ratti locates in this novel lie in the affirmative values of friendship and community that exist outside of the failures of human rights, institutional religion and nationalism.

The fourth chapter examines Shauna Singh Bladwin's *What the Body Remembers*. Here the focus is on Sikhism as a minority tradition in India that challenges a discourse of India as a secular state. The novel's postsecularism is presented as a gendered critique that explores the diversity within the often homogenizing rhetoric of religious and national identity. This diversity in the novel is complex, in process and not a fixed entity. This allows Ratti to argue that the postsecularism of the novel is located in the untranslatability of religion, nation and gendered experience.

The fifth chapter engages with Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Through the novel, argues Ratti, Rushdie critiques fundamentalism by focusing on the diversity of beliefs in Islam. The novel also functions as a critique of the unequal sense of secularism and liberalism as it is found in the UK with respect to diasporic minority perspectives. Ratti also deals with the *fatwa* issued against Rushdie and the impact of Rushdie's diasporic location. The sixth chapter continues the exploration of Rushdie by examining his novels published after the *fatwa*, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, *Shalimar the Clown*, and *The Enchantress of Florence*. Here Ratti demonstrates a hardening of Rushdie's views on secularism and Islam, but also a use of literature to challenge extremist religious rhetoric by illustrating a diversity and hybridity of religious expression and experience. For Ratti, Rushdie's postsecular values of the migrants' experience, hybridity, newness and love can be found throughout the works he studies.

The seventh chapter studies Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Mahasweta Devi's novella 'Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha'. Both illustrate failures of the state to protect indigenous groups that challenge the notion of a homogeneous secular state. Here, as with other elements of the book, Ratti illustrates the diversity and syncretism of the traditions covered in these works. The book closes with Ratti stressing the potential issues and dangers associated with the postsecular. The values of the postsecular, he argues, are experimental and tenuous as do they run the risk of degenerating into sentiment. The postsecular, particularly when expressed from a diasporic view, also runs the risk of becoming insensitive and of replacing religion. With these important qualifications made, Ratti affirms the

postsecular values he has identified in the book: friendship, art, literature, community, nature, the migrant's perspective, newness and love.

Ratti's book is a success and important reading for those interested in secularism, religion, postsecularism and postcolonial theory. The text is well written, carefully argued and full of insights into the rewards found in pursuing such unstable ideas like postsecularism, and the ability of literature to explore such new horizons. While some may critique the book because the meaning of the postsecular remains somewhat indeterminate, for this reviewer this illustration of indeterminacy and creativity associated with this concept is one of the many strengths of the book.